Fashion, the Politics of Style and National Identity in Pre-Fascist and Fascist Italy

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An Istituto Luce documentary entitled La Grande adunata delle forze femminili (Great parade of female forces) illustrates the ambivalent policy of the fascist regime towards the roles and images of women and reveals links between fashion, the policy that governed it and political culture during the fascist regime. The documentary describes a rally that took place in Rome on 28 May 1939, chronicling a massive female parade organised by Mussolini himself. This national gathering of women from all over Italy that celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Fasci giovanili di combattimento was an occasion to display women as an integral part of the national body politic through their uniforms, and their roles in the family and society. The film shows women from the Red Cross, students from the Orvieto Academy representing a wide range of sports, women from the countryside and others, all gathered at the Circo Massimo before going on to parade to Piazza Venezia for the welcome salute and speech by Mussolini and other gerarchi. Three distinct moments of the documentary juxtapose shots of women wearing sports uniforms with shots of the women from the countryside wearing regional costumes. These stills (Figures 1, 2 and 3) illustrate the sharp contrast between the military-like uniformity of the athletes and the women in traditional regional costumes, but also the differences in dress within the latter group of women. Those in regional costume wear accessories such as necklaces, earrings, shawls, lace collars, ornaments and headgear. Their body postures differ from the women wearing the regime-sponsored or sports uniforms: they look as if they are out taking a walk rather than marching. For the majority of these women, the differences in ornamentation were signs of their sense of belonging to strong local traditions of fine artisan craftsmanship, something that
Figure 1: ‘Massaie Rurali, Great Parade of Female Forces’, Rome, 28 May 1939. Reproduced by permission of ‘Istituto Luce’, Rome.
Figure 2: ‘Women Rowers, Great Parade of Female Forces’, Rome, 28 May 1939. Reproduced by permission of ‘Istituto Luce’, Rome.
Figure 3: ‘Massaie Rurali, Great Parade of Female Forces’, Rome, 28 May 1939. Reproduced by permission of ‘Istituto Luce’, Rome.
continues to characterise and distinguish the Italian style even today in the twenty-first century.

What we find illustrated in the documentary footage is a visual confirmation of the two-sided, indeed ambivalent, nature of the fascist attempt to include every single woman of the Italian peninsula in its purview. In this way, the regime could show off its ‘good face’ in tolerating and appearing to exalt at one and the same time the modern woman wearing the military uniform and local time-honoured traditions. This is especially striking in the perfectly symmetrical and geometric space occupied by the women dressed in uniforms seen against the more disorganised and scattered space occupied by the women in regional costumes.

Victoria De Grazia has described the contrast between the two female components seen in the documentary as a ‘shift from military to fashion’ and attributes to the women dressed in their regional costumes a rebellious individualism at odds with the massive presence of military uniforms. However, because in this section of her article De Grazia relies not on the documentary itself, but on a written report of the parade, she misreads the meaning of the women’s local costumes which, far from being a transgression of the dress codes prescribed by fascism, fell squarely within those codes. We must not be misled by the apparent contrast between uniformity and individualism that seems to be displayed in this popular spectacle. In fact, according to fascist regulations, the women from the countryside, the massaie rurali, were encouraged to wear their local costumes in order to highlight the nation’s rich and diversified traditions as well as to display the beautiful embroidery that they themselves had created. Dress historian Patrizia Ribuoli in her essay ‘Le Uniformi civili nel Regime Fascista’ (Civil uniforms under the fascist regime) affirms, in fact, that wearing regional costumes ‘instead of the official uniforms’ for the massaie rurali was ‘perfectly in line with fascist ideology’ insofar as it maintained and emphasised traditions of which the whole peninsula could be proud. This, of course, does not undermine De Grazia’s challenge to the extent of women’s consent to fascism, a thesis supported by other important scholarship. But a closer examination reveals that neither fascist policy on fashion (which allowed space for the cohabitation of both military uniforms and local costumes) nor attempts to circumvent that policy (which De Grazia erroneously attributes to the massaie) are simple, univocal questions. Indeed, despite extensive study of how fascism manifested its two unmatchable ambivalent souls in the construction of the so-called ‘new Italian woman’, there is no serious work on the role that fashion and its apparatus of diffusion played in the project of nationalising women or in the creation of a recognisable ‘national style’. Neither have serious attempts been made to gauge the

extent to which its policies were successful. My aim here is to offer an in-depth analysis of the political dimension of fashion under fascism, and how and why fashion became a concern of the fascist state to the point of giving rise to a specially created government institution.

By way of introduction, let me mention a number of steps taken by the fascist regime in the field of fashion in order to create the context in which the spectacle of the women’s parade and its bearing on the fascist representation of women is best interpreted. The emphasis given to local costume had an immediate link to the massive initiatives undertaken by the regime in this regard in the 1930s. In 1932 Mussolini founded a government institution called the Ente autonomo per la mostra permanente nazionale della moda (Autonomous body for the permanent national fashion exhibition, EAMPNM). To this was delegated the task of overseeing the complete cycle of creativity and production of fashion by way of two major biannual exhibitions and fashion shows held in Turin, the body’s headquarters. Later, in 1934, the name of the institution was simplified to Ente nazionale della moda (National fashion body, ENM). The ENM aimed at organising and promoting the Italian fashion industry and made various attempts to regulate women’s dress. Since one of the credos of the ENM was to persuade female consumers and dressmakers to seek inspiration in Italy’s domestic roots, the organisation emphasised regional customs as a form of true italianità. Not only fashion but also related domestic traditions were recruited with the aim of boosting patriotism and national pride. One of the tasks of the regime was to promote sectors of the handicraft industry most closely linked to fashion, such as embroidery, lace, coral and straw, by creating another body, the Ente nazionale artigianato e piccole industrie (National body for crafts and small industries). To rally support for this policy, one of the members of the Italian royal family, the Princess of Piedmont, Maria José, was photographed in 1933 in the fashion magazine La Donna wearing a regional costume. On the same pages of the magazine, we find juxtaposed drawings of evening gowns designed by Brunetta Mateldi, inspired by regional costumes (Figures 4 and 5). The space given to local costumes in the fascist rally is a sign, then, neither of women’s dissent nor of their individualism, but is an expression of the official policy of exalting nationalism through the inclusion of regional differences, a policy which had a key influence on fashion. The subtext to these photos was to use the Savoy princess’s royal image to convince well-off women and aristocrats not to go to Paris to purchase their dresses but to remain instead within the national boundaries.

Fascist fashion policy regarding the promotion of and emphasis on regional dress as a source of inspiration for Italian dress design had several tangled threads. Within the fashion world, fascist policies did not
**Figure 4:** From the monthly magazine, *La Donna*, September 1933. Published with permission from L’Archivio Bonizza Giordani Aragno, Italy.

**Figure 5:** From the monthly magazine, *La Donna*, September 1933. Published with permission from L’Archivio Bonizza Giordani Aragno, Italy.
meet with complete approval. Not everybody agreed that folkloric dresses could be an always valid and single source of inspiration. Brunetta’s drawings published in the pages of La Donna, set alongside the photographs of the princess in local costume, bear only a vague similarity to the clothes worn by Maria José. The tension between these diametrically opposed modes of conceptualising fashion is conveyed by the ambiguous expression of the models’ eyes that betray a subtle sarcasm as they direct their gaze towards the costumes worn by Her Highness. The models in the drawings seem almost to whisper, ‘We understand that what you are wearing is the dictate of the regime, but it is we who decide what fashion we like the most.’ Most striking in these pages is the sharp contrast between the country look of the queen – a sort of populist attempt suggesting that royals were close to ordinary people – and the glamour and sophistication hinted at in Brunetta’s drawings.

The tension within the fashion world illustrated by the juxtaposition of images in the pages of La Donna, between the fascist valorisation of the local and the desire for more glamorous designs, is but one of many tensions that undercut and ultimately destabilised fascist policies. Another was represented by conflicts between the fascist emphasis on the local and the regime’s policy of repressing regionalism, including the campaign towards a standardised national language over local dialects. In 1936 the ENM published the Commentario dizionario Italiano della moda (Commentary and Italian dictionary of fashion) by the journalist and writer Cesare Meano, whose aim was to purge the language of fashion of all foreign terminology. Meano’s text is a great example of the formation of a fashion discourse in the cultural politics of fascism. It strove to uniform the social body and appearance in dress, but also and no less to create a national character that would fit fascist ideology and gender representation.

By encouraging standardisation of dress, the fascist regime also sought to erase the numerous differences of class, geography and culture that were characteristic of 1920s and 1930s Italy, and to a great extent still are today. One example of this was the massive use of civil uniforms. Some photographs show newborn babies wearing a fez, the headgear typical of fascist militants. To foster standardisation, the regime invested in the creation of a national textile and apparel industry. This policy was driven, above all, by the desire to wrestle Italian fashion away from what was perceived as the pernicious influence of French fashion, which, in the West, was seen as the indisputable world leader. The attempts to create the industrial bases for domestically produced fashion were part and parcel of the regime’s attempts to homogenise a stratified social body, divided by gender and class. These initiatives, which recruited the mass media (newspapers, magazines, Luce newsreels, cinema, parades, public

exhibitions, etc.) to unite the Italian population in a single sense of national identity, were successful only at the level of display and spectacle and did little or nothing to change the underlying structures of society.

In a similar vein, the massaie rurali seen in the newsreel are presented as if they were participants in the regime’s achievements in the field of textile production. They are thus rendered protagonists in the life of the fascist state at the same level as the urban and urbane middle-class women with slender and fashionable bodies who were consumers of make-up and trendy clothes. Artificially classed together, these two sets of women actually had little in common in terms of geography, class, consumer habits and power. This approach coincided with another tenet of fascist ideology, that of persuading social subjects who were weaker either on account of their gender or class – women and workers – to believe they were agents and protagonists of history. This same intent underlies the order to wear civil uniforms and so give the illusion of a sense of order and discipline, but above all to suggest a belonging to the fatherland and to Il Duce.

In the world of fascist fashion policy there was room, albeit with considerable tension, for both the local and the national, the traditional and the modern, the prolific mother and the Orvieto academist: opposite figures who turn out to be two sides of the same coin, two products of the same ideology that aimed at controlling women in the same breath as it put their differences on display. Nevertheless, difference, especially in terms of resistance to the strict codes, was not to disappear even in the dream of the fascist totalitarian state. Despite the regime’s attempt to coagulate and control the social body in a centrifugal mode, influencing the masses, their costumes, social habits and language, an opposite, centripetal force was always at work almost side by side with it. Paradoxically, the very same institutions whose task it was to standardise and control also became the site for the construction of several niches of individual creativity. Indeed, as concerns both production and consumption, no field illustrates this complex two-fold process better than fashion. Fashion on the one hand assisted in the alignment of the regime’s policies, while, on the other, producing from within its system visible forms of individualism and creativity that went against fascist policy.

In the crucial years between the two World Wars, fashion acts as an essential tool for the study of the social transformations of various components of Italian society. The following section discusses how fashion discourse and the policies and politics produced under fascism illustrate the hegemonic mechanisms recognised by Antonio Gramsci as determining factors in the formation of a historical bloc. At the same
time, however, I would like to underline how such an analysis reveals that the inherent complexity of cultural phenomena characterised by creativity and individualism cannot be contained by a single hegemonic discourse. In this way, we can also explain why neither individual and creative uses of fashion, nor the style of specific designers, can be understood under a single unifying discourse. These are all elements that are not always controllable, and which can ultimately help in the crumbling and transformation of sedimented hegemonic political ideologies, cultures and styles.

It would be a mistake to think that fascist policy on fashion was produced in an ahistorical vacuum. Much of fascist policy, especially the nationalistic intent that inspired the creation of national bodies, is rooted in the debates in and around fashion that took place in Italy in the pre-fascist liberal years. Indeed, there is a strong line of continuity in the role ascribed to fashion that stretches from the early years of the twentieth century up to and into the fascist period. The two periods share the assumption that fashion is to have first and foremost a role in the forming and cementing of national identity. Focusing on these two periods shows that, in the pre-fascist years, Italian fashion was already characterised by the high degree of creativity that would enable it to emerge on the world scene at the end of World War II and gradually impose its presence on a massive scale in today’s global market. In this respect, my study differs from Nicola White’s examination of the post-World War II years. Italian fashion was not born in the period of reconstruction, as White leads one to believe. The great strides forward that the Italian fashion industry took in the years following 1945, which White accurately chronicles, were posited on what the industry had already achieved in the prewar period. My examination of fashion before and under fascism complements White’s study because it shows how the seeds of the postwar emergence of Italian fashion as a major player on the international stage were sown.

Any style of dress or ornamentation linked to a particular country, its people, its culture, and what constitutes its national character, has a long history that is intimately connected with the development of fashion. White is certainly right when she affirms that the expression ‘easeful grace’, used as early as 1951, has become increasingly synonymous with ‘Italian style’. Nevertheless, the concept of mixing elegance and ease, as in the case of ‘bella figura’ – looking good – and natural ease – grace – both have a long history in Italian culture. In fact, the ultimate point of reference for much Italian fashion, whether it be pre- or postwar, was the Renaissance. As early as the beginning of the sixteenth century, Baldassarre Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) first identified Italian style in language, manners and dress, with the concept of
sprezzatura (a well-constructed easeful or ‘natural’ grace). As we shall see, references to the Italian Renaissance are legion in the world of fashion, either as a moment of national grandeur to be recovered, or as a moment when a national style was at its zenith. Fittingly, when Giovanbattista Giorgini organised his famous fashion show in his family palace on 14 February 1951, at which the best of Italian designers showed off their designs to US buyers (opening the way for the massive and lucrative influx of Italian creations on the US market), he did so in Florence, the quintessential Renaissance city, underlining the continuity between the achievements of that period and those of the contemporary designers, heirs apparent to that glory.

Fascist policies on fashion were complex and multi-layered in another way. Not only did they valorise simultaneously the old and the new but they also reflected the social, political and cultural transformations of classes and individuals resulting from the process of modernisation that gathered steam in the latter fascist years.

If, on the one hand, Italy was entrapped by the exasperated nationalism of a totalitarian regime, on the other, the nation also sought to keep up with the modernising pace of other western capitalist countries. The process of modernisation, begun in the prewar years, never stopped, but went ahead at an incredible speed in the postwar period. In this, the influence of the US, and all it stood for in those years, cannot be underestimated. Since the 1920s, the US ready-to-wear industry had been gradually improving and expanding both nationally and on the European market. At the same time, the culture industry, through Hollywood films, popular, female magazines and department stores, targeted a growing number of Italian consumers whose modes and responses helped to shape a new form of popular culture, now more open than ever before to embracing US goods and entertainment. Fascist Italy, despite the politics of self-sufficiency during its autarchic phase, turned out not to be completely immune – in common with other European countries – from a gradual transformation of the social body, as well as from a process of ‘Americanisation’. Hollywood films played a key role in this, but so did the visits made to North America by industrialists, economists and others, including Olivetti and Pirelli, Ferragamo and Emilio Pucci, who were destined to have leadership roles in the development of Italian accessories and fashion.

As we shall see, fascism’s inability to escape from its entrapment between two opposing and contradictory forces, tradition and modernism, was reproduced in its fashion policies. The twin figures of the prolific mother and the athletic woman with her dynamic body, both figures that were promoted by the regime, reveal this internal dichotomy. Just as importantly, fascist attempts to control strictly the appearance of the
social body were destined to fail, since fashion is by definition nourished by the constant drive for the new which is inherent in its transient nature, its erotic appeal and its strong hold on imagination and creativity.

In order to understand the continuity of the debate on nationalism, fashion and the search for a national style leading into the fascist period, let us take a step back and consider the most prominent figures in the battle for an ‘Italian fashion’ in the years preceding the advent of fascism.

Rosa Genoni, one of the pioneers and most fervent advocates of efforts to wrestle Italian fashion away from its subalternity to France, clearly represents continuity between the two periods. Genoni was, indeed, a remarkable figure whose important role in the history of fashion has not been sufficiently acknowledged. She firmly believed that it was important for Italians working in the field of fashion to discover and develop an autonomous style that was recognised as Italian and not a mere copy of French fashion. Born in 1867, in the midst of the Italian unification process, Genoni was determined and courageous. The first dress-maker to become a writer, teacher and political activist, she was also the first to attempt a historical account of Italian costume. She never tired of pointing out both the limits of Italian fashion and the potential it possessed for becoming independent from foreign models. Genoni understood that the Renaissance was an important inspiration for the Italian tradition in creativity and art in the field of fashion. Thus, she studied the paintings, fashion plates and sketches of the period in which the ‘Italian’ style first spread to the major courts of Europe, particularly the role played by powerful women such as Beatrice and Isabella D’Este. She saw the vestiges of the Renaissance tradition in the wealth of creativity and design in Italian local craftsmanship and the sewing skills of many tailors and dress-makers. To give new blood to this patrimony, she proposed strategies for organising Italy’s almost anarchic field of fashion. These ranged from providing better theoretical and practical training in professional schools to establishing formal links among various branches of the sector, like fashion houses, workers and ‘case di confezione’. Some of her proposals, for example the formation of a state-controlled institution (later to be called ENM) charged with organising the clothing and textile industry, were later to be taken up by the fascist regime.

The two-year period in which Genoni worked as a première in a Parisian atelier was fundamental to the elaboration of her ideas. In Paris, she studied history of art and costume, as well as technical and artistic drawing, and realised that the production of a dress resulted from collaboration between the dress-maker and a group of experts in the decorative arts. She also realised that some materials used in French
dress-making were imported from Italy, but that, even if Italy possessed the raw materials for a fashion industry, something important was lacking. French fashion was famous even beyond the nation’s boundaries. In fact, for the wealthy buyers who could afford them, French clothes were synonymous with what was chic, simply by virtue of being French. One of the effects of this in the US, as well as in Italy, was that French-sounding labels were put on domestically designed and produced garments. As far as Genoni was concerned, French couture and design were the enemy to be defeated, in part for political and geographical reasons. Paris had long been considered the world capital of fashion and was the centre from which emanated the entire fashion industry. There was no such centre in Italy. Rather, Italy boasted several centres of art and culture, and diverse craft and culinary traditions. Italy was a de-centred nation, with a weak sense of the nation as a united entity. An article in the May 1919 issue of *Lidel*, that drew on one of Genoni’s earlier proposals to set up a government institution to oversee and coordinate the fashion industry, revealed the internal rivalry between cities that hindered the creation of a national fashion industry strong enough to challenge France.

The major lesson Genoni learned from her Parisian experience was that the setting-up of professional fashion schools was key for the development of an autonomous style. She was also convinced that people working in the apparel industry lacked a sense of who and what Italy was and had been, especially in the arts and culture. For this reason, a vital plank in her project to organise and launch the Italian decorative arts and fashion involved turning back to the past in order to find the sense of identity, conspicuously absent in the present, that could be promoted both domestically and abroad.

Genoni never passed up an opportunity to point out that Italian decoration, fabric and other raw materials were often acquired by French couturiers at a low price and then found their way back to the Italian market as French-produced clothes and were sold at extortionate prices. This kind of exploitation, she wrote, had to be stopped. She was in a perfect position to observe the backwardness of Italy in terms of organisation and lack of proper schools. She denounced this situation in a paper she gave at the *Primo congresso delle donne italiane* (First congress of Italian women), held in Rome in 1908, at which Genoni participated as a member of the Socialist delegation. She points out that technology – as we would call it today – and art are not separate, but work side by side. In addition, and no less importantly, she hints at a more accessible notion of art, one that does not see it solely in terms of museum objects or works of art jealously kept in private houses and salons for the privileged few to admire. She advocated the idea of a less...
elitist concept of art that is visible in objects on display in everyday life, on the street: in the form of architecture, the decorations of buildings, statues, and clothing. She stresses the strong Italian tradition for popular, public art appreciated by ordinary people, harking back to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. However, she wanted Italian dress designs to use the Italian Renaissance not to reproduce passively the nation’s past glories, but rather as a source of artistic inspiration to incorporate traditions into new concepts of style and beauty that would express the pulse of modern times.

At the Prima conferenza nazionale delle donne italiane Genoni presented a motion in favour of a national fashion approved by the majority present. Her proposal stressed the vital role that could be played by an organised and strengthened official body that would bring together the female crafts of lace, embroidery and the decorative arts, which represented a source of wealth in the Italian peninsula’s female economy. Genoni also emphasised that the French style of elaborate decoration was not always suitable for the Italian woman and her lifestyle; and that the ready-made clothing industry could produce more affordable garments styled for Italian women’s tastes and needs. Her observations about differences between highly priced couture and the more democratic version of fashion foresaw the future of fashion in Italy.

Genoni’s approach to the history of Italian fashion had political, cultural and aesthetic implications. Indeed, Genoni’s role was not limited to her insight into the economic importance fashion could play in Italian life and her desire to recoup Italy’s Renaissance traditions. She was also acutely aware of fashion’s close links to women’s issues and feminism. She insisted that feminism should in no way consider fashion and style as diminishing women’s political claims. Because women have consistently expressed themselves through fashion and legions of women worked in the clothing industry, feminism would do well not to underestimate the impact of fashion on women’s lives. In sensing that aesthetics is part and parcel of fashion, and in seeing it as a strength, not as a belittling of women’s intellectual ability, Genoni was a pioneer in articulating issues that have come to the fore only recently in the fields of feminism, history of fashion and fashion theory.

In sum, Genoni was a leading light in the debate on key issues: the return to the Renaissance as a moment of inspiration and pride; the need to update the institutions governing Italy’s fashion industry; and the urgency of freeing Italian fashion from French hegemony. Her ideas were part of pre-World War I thinking about patriotism and nationalism. The clothing and fashion industry fostered the definition of a national character and boosted national pride, and also contributed to the modern economy. Constructive and non-elitist, Genoni’s project is characterised
by its sensitivity to workers’ rights and the attention she pays to women both as workers in the industry and as consumers.

For other participants, however, in pre-World War I debate on culture and the arts, fashion was the terrain that represented a rupture between past and present. In this context, Genoni represents a voice of moderation when compared to the Futurists, who were far more radical in their ideas. The experiments and creations of painters like Giacomo Balla, and others such as Fortunato Depero, and Ernesto Thayant who designed for Madeleine Vionnet, although they did not become part of mainstream fashion at that time, represented a far more elitist form of rupture and transgression. These were taken up in France, where couture drew inspiration from Futurist design, as is illustrated by many of the exhibits at the Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes held in Paris in 1925.¹⁸

Even if they did not meet with much enthusiasm in Italy, Balla’s designs of clothing and accessories, from hats, scarves and shoes to handbags, still remain an important historical document, a source of inspiration for new ideas regarding shape and colours and experimentation in both male and female clothing. The Futurist project aimed at revolutionising society and individuals. This project had personal implications insofar as it required the redesigning of clothes to suit the revolutionary spirit. Futurist clothing design represented deep ruptures in the symmetry of the cut of clothes in order to allow the wearer more movement and dynamism, and eliminated the bourgeois dark and ‘neutral’ colours of male clothing. The Futurists were amongst the most vociferous proponents of war, and associated nationalism and militarism with dress.

Although the Futurists stressed clothing as inherently political and communicative and linked it to the debate on intervention in the war, their nationalism never took the form of a policy that aimed at creating conditions for the emergence of the kind of national fashion for which they argued. The patriotism animating Genoni’s project of creating an autonomous Italian fashion was, in the years before and immediately after World War I, light years away from the kind of bellicose and expansionist nationalism of sectors of Italian cultural and intellectual debate. The war, however, was going to profoundly influence the social and political transformation taking place in Italy and the rest of Europe, and was to bring to women’s lives new forms of agency and subjectivity.

World War I brought drastic changes to society, the economy and the organisation of the family. Many women whose husbands, fathers, brothers and sons were at war took positions of command in the many sectors of the economy left vacant by men called to fight in the war. New problems arose when men returned from the front and, as in other
countries, in Italy women were pushed out of the industrial workplace. However, the new political situation and the growing sense of unease and instability following World War I, did not erase some of the benefits that the tragedy of the war had paradoxically brought women, even in fascist Italy. Because many women proved they were capable of doing men’s jobs in addition to being care-givers and house-makers, some gained greater freedom and power within and outside their homes. In addition, the gradual shift toward an industrial economy and the influence of Hollywood cinema and US commodities led to an increase in consumption of mass-produced goods. Most advertising was now directed at middle-class female consumers, many of whom managed the household budget. Because of the growing demand for goods aimed specifically at women, a number of periodicals oriented towards a female audience came into being, grew in number and continued to increase from the beginning of the century and throughout the 1930s.

The magazine Lidel, founded in 1919 and aimed at a female bourgeois audience with spending power, was among the most important because of its focus on fashion and other activities including work, and its mission to transmit a sense of italianità, of Italian national identity and nationhood. Named for Lydia Dosio De Liguoro, but also for Letture, illustrazioni, disegni, eleganze, lavori (Readings, illustrations, drawings, elegance, works), Lidel was highly sophisticated in design and appearance, and featured contributions from well-known writers and artists such as Grazia Deledda, Luigi Pirandello (both later to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature), Ada Negri, Carola Prosperi, Sibilla Aleramo, Amalia Guglielminetti, Goffredo Bellonci, Matilde Serao, Eugenio Treves and others. Lidel’s mission was a tall order. In a variety of fields a sense of nation seemed to be in tatters. Yet, using fashion as a major vehicle for the development of its cultural, aesthetic, political and economic project, Lidel strenuously promoted a modern Italy and a sense of pride and belonging among its people.

One of the central pillars proposed to counteract French hegemony in fashion was the centralisation of Italian fashion policy, delegating its enactment to a state-run body. In her articles, De Liguoro reaffirmed that such a centralised governmental institution would not only organise the clothing and textile industries, including tailors’ and dress-makers’ shops, but also promote better professional education for people working in the field. Many of the proposals put forward by Genoni and De Liguoro mirror each other, and differences between them came to the fore only once the fascist regime came to power. Unlike Genoni, who had no sympathy for fascism and Mussolini, De Liguoro belonged to the female ardite from Milan, pre-fascists dissatisfied with the outcome of World War I who identified with conservative nationalists’ belief that at

the Treaty of Versailles Italy had been cheated out of territories promised by its war allies.

Thus, it was partly out of national political sentiments that De Liguoro exhorted wealthy Italian women not to buy dresses in Paris, and reflected on the prejudices discouraging them from patronising Italian fashion houses. Yet the practical details of her project were similar to that of Genoni. De Liguoro complains that a very fine dress, created by a Milanese fashion house and called ‘Villa D’Este’, was refused by clients as it had an Italian label. Later the outfit was labelled ‘Ville d’Orléans’, and presented as the creation of a made up Parisian house called K.Y. (two letters that do not belong to the Italian alphabet) and was sold immediately, a successful strategy that continued for the whole season. Like Genoni, De Liguoro stressed that fabric from Como and Florence, purchased at a low price and then used to create French models, came back to Italy to be sold at high prices. Using patriotic language and emphasising the potential of Italian artisans and artists for the development of an Italian style, she mentions several ways to boost local craftsmanship in lace and embroidery in a number of Italian cities and regions.

The history of fascist fashion policy is one of continuities rather than ruptures. Especially in the regime’s first nationalist phase, fascism’s strategies in the field of fashion drew on the cultural ferments and proposals originated in the world of fashion in liberal Italy. In fact, the foundation of fascist fashion policy was in line with the project envisaged by Genoni and De Liguoro, but co-opted and turned to the regime’s own overtly nationalistic end.

The construction of a new Italy and new Italians, for men, women and children alike, was a vital plank in the fascist regime’s political and cultural project. The subtext of much of the intellectual debate of these years is the question of how to rescue and render great the recently born Italian nation: how to awaken it from the state of slumber into which it had slipped, and how to produce a new national subject, no longer prey to the character deficiencies that had led Italy into its current state of near crisis. Fashion played an important role in this process both in the pre-fascist years and in the years of the regime itself. During fascism, De Liguoro continued to be one of the strongest voices arguing for the need to build a national, efficient fashion industry able to compete and counteract the hegemony of French fashion. But now her voice took on much more decidedly fascist overtones. Believing that the key to a successful domestic fashion industry was demand from within Italy itself, she argued, long before the regime’s autarchic phase, that the fashion industry, working in conjunction with the regime and its press, needed to create a form of consensus among Italian upper-bourgeois women and
encourage them to direct their vanity towards domestic products. Never-
theless, De Liguoro’s articles notwithstanding, not a great deal of
attention seems to have been paid by fascist authorities to the economic
and cultural benefits that could accrue to the nation through a more
energetic promotion and organisation of fashion. It was not uncommon,
in fact, for Italian couturiers to complain of the lack of effectiveness of the
ENM in the coordination of initiatives to promote Italian fashion
abroad. One recurrent problem was that collections were presented in
the very season for which they were intended – winter clothes in winter,
for example – and so not enough time was allowed for the production
and launch of the models outside Italy.22

Some of these problems were never to be completely resolved, even
with the inception of the ENM. Divisions still persisted among various
cities like Milan, Rome and Turin, all of whose distinct regional traditions
in craftsmanship and industry hindered the development of a univocal
direction for fashion policy. Milan, especially through Montano’s
initiatives and leadership, tended more towards the development of an
Italian-style haute couture, which had been missing in Italy. Frictions,
then, persisted between the artisan tailors and an industrial sector that
was more directed towards mass production.23

We should remember, however, that De Liguoro’s thoughts on fashion
policies under fascism were not at odds with fascist ideology on women.
Indeed, her articles often betray fascism’s reactionary and classist
vision of women. Moreover, De Liguoro carried out her lobbying from
the columns of the Popolo d’Italia, the fascist daily newspaper, endorsing
Il Duce’s pronouncements on fashion: ‘An Italian fashion in furniture, in
decoration and in dress does not yet exist: it is possible to create it, it
must be created.’ In the same article she reveals the paternalistic
ideology underlying her writing in the fascist years, when she states that
women working for the clothing industry would be much happier
working at home instead of ‘tiring out their brains’ working at their desks
in an office.24 This, of course, is firmly in line with fascist policy, which
was not to give women the same opportunity as males in clerical and
professional work. It was also a policy dictated by the fear that in time of
crisis and unemployment women would steal men’s jobs. As a result, it
seemed easier to control women’s lives while they were working from
home and receiving low wages, but at the same time producing goods of
the highest quality for their patrons.

The consolidation of the regime’s policy on fashion was part and
parcel of a more general move to consolidate control in other areas of
Italian life. In the 1930s several government institutions were set up to
ensure fascist control over areas like sport and leisure time. Along with
fashion the regime used the cinema and sport to convey and solidify
its message of modernity, discipline, order and amusement. Sport and cinema, in fact, thanks to institutions such as the Organizzazione nazionale dopolavoro (National after-work organisation, hereafter OND) presided over a consistent part of the Italian lower-middle and working class’s free time. However, it would be wrong to think that these activities were completely under the thumb of fascist control. For many Italians, fashion, sport and cinema offered a chance, even momentarily, to escape the grip and greyness of a totalitarian regime.

Fashion, sport and cinema were interrelated in many ways because they drew on the visual power inherent in spectacles displaying dynamism and modernity. Thus, cinema, sport and fashion were linked in the diffusion and the creation of national models and physical bodies with which women of all classes could identify or fantasise. Movie-going became one of the most popular pastimes. Especially in less urban parts of the country, where fashion magazines were a luxury item, films inspired ordinary women and dress-makers, who often copied the fashionable items they saw on the screen. The diffusion of sport influenced women’s fashion a great deal, simplifying lines without sacrificing elegance. A number of pictures in these fashion magazines, as well as the photographs of women attending the Female Academy in Orvieto, confirm this, showing snugly fitting, yet comfortable, clothing and suits, composed of different interchangeable pieces, as well as shirts and skirts showing slender and attractive bodies. This fashion was intensified during World War II when, despite the lack of material and fabrics, the magazine Bellezza continued to offer new ideas for women’s fashion. The emphasis was given to clothing, coats, raincoats and accessories that showed a casual elegance and which were made out of autarchic (domestically produced) fabrics. For example, gloves were made out of fabric because of the lack of leather, and the designer Ferragamo made platform shoes constructed from readily available cork and transparent plastic, using bright colours and an avant-garde design. Bellezza also showed a series of pictures called ‘Sport and Fashion’, emphasising the relationship between the two, which had gradually changed women’s lives as well as their self and public images. The women in these pictures wear dresses, deconstructed suits and cardigans in wool mixed with fiocco (an artificial fibre); their raincoats are lined with fabric in bright colours and are worn over simple yet stylish dresses. This relaxed elegance suggests that the relationship between sport and fashion would eventually lead to experiments in the design of clothes for the modern woman who works and has a busy life outside the domestic walls. In fact, the Italian designer Emilio Pucci, who became one of the icons of success during the Italian economic boom of the late 1950s, made sportswear his trademark.
Stricter policies emerged from the ENM after 1935, following the fascist invasion of Ethiopia and the subsequent sanctions applied against Italy by the League of Nations. The economic hardship that had been intensified by foreign sanctions required a new set of regulations and led to the development of autarchic fabrics and fashion, so that the economy could become self-sufficient and not rely on foreign imports of raw materials. In these years, the textile industry was engaged in the production of the so-called ‘tessuti-tipo’ that were to be approved and recognised as Italian by the ENM and to be used both for clothing, interior design and furnishing. In fact, artificial fibres domestically produced – such as rayon and lanital and others – became one of the successes in the autarchic phase of the regime. To control and guarantee domestic production, the ENM introduced a label – called a marca di garanzia – for models and fabrics that now could be recognised as ‘Italian’ creations and products. At the same time, the ENM also established the percentage of Italianness – first 35 per cent, later 50 per cent – for fabric, models, or any production relating to fashion, accessories and textile. As the extant documents testify, the initiatives of the regime had a major influence on promoting the domestic production of textiles and fabrics. However, some of the well-known artists such as Marcello Dudovich and Ester Sormani did not waste any opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with the autarchic policies of the regime. They maintained that in order to create new models they needed the constant nourishment of new ideas and inspiration. This implies an openness towards other cultures and artistic experiments and their readaptation within the original design. Here the artists meant that neither uniforms nor Italian regional costumes could be the only source of inspiration for fashion and that a culture closed in its nationalistic, totalitarian and autarchic modes was anathema to the creativity and change inherent in fashion.

During World War II, when Italy was occupied by two foreign armies – one fighting alongside Italian partisans against the Nazis, the other fighting with the Nazis’ Italian allies from Mussolini’s puppet regime – the fashion industry and single designers were not paralysed. For example, the Fontana sisters, one of Italy’s leading postwar fashion houses, established itself in Rome in 1944 as soon as the Germans left the city, vacating the aristocratic building they had been occupying. Micol Fontana remembers that she was able to get the fabric she needed from Jewish retailers who had hidden their goods in their basements; she exchanged it for potatoes and other vegetables from her parents’ farm outside Rome. Here, she recalls, they also helped to hide a Jewish refugee. Despite adverse circumstances, many industrious, creative and resilient people working in the different branches of fashion prepared
the terrain for the future success of Italian fashion in the post-World War II period. Indeed, as we have seen, the history of fascist fashion policy is one of continuities rather than ruptures. It was on the basis of the debate on nationalism that took place in the pre-fascist liberal period, as well as on the proposals put forward by Genoni, that many of the foundations for the postwar boom were laid. Mussolini was a beneficiary of this. His regime understood the political, economic and cultural potential of a national fashion. But, rather than invent fashion, fascism took advantage of it.

Notes
This essay is dedicated to the memory of my father, Nunzio Paulicelli (1918–2002), who was the first to teach me anti-fascism.

1. The Cinegiornale Luce of the rally is a 25-minute documentary held at the Istituto Luce Archive in Cinecittà, Rome.
4. See La Donna, September 1933.
6. In fact, the protectionism practised by the regime, a policy that to differing degrees was also adopted in the US and other European countries, had the effect of laying the foundations for an autonomous fashion industry and the sense of self that ensued.
7. It is interesting that, even in the use of fascist civil uniforms, people found various personal ways of self-adaptation to the norms. See Ribuoli, ‘Le Uniformi civili’, pp. 35–6.
8. Nicola White, Reconstructing Italian Fashion: America and the Development of the Italian Fashion Industry (Berg, 2000). The reference to fashion in fascist Italy is at pp. 76–7. See also the reference to the formation of the GFT group in 1932. This is a detail worthy of further study, see pp. 68–9.
9. I analyse these issues in depth in my forthcoming book: Fashion Narratives: Gender and National Identity in Italy, from which the present material is taken and where I dedicate two chapters to the Renaissance and the role of fashion in the creation of the public image, national character and identity. In sixteenth-century Italy the debate on style, literary and non, and its political valence was lively in a variety of texts by both female and male authors. See also E. Paulicelli, ‘Performing the Gendered Self in Castiglione’s The Book of the Courtier, and the Discourse on Fashion’, in Annalecta Husserliana, ed. A. T. Tymieniecka, vol. 71, pp. 237–48.

13. See Nancy L. Greene, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Duke University Press, 1997), p. 112. I learned this in the course of the interviews I conducted with the couturiers Micol Fontana and Fernanda Gattinoni, who worked for the atelier Ventura, one of the most prestigious fashion houses in the 1930s, with branches in Rome and Milan.


15. A comprehensive history of the Italian tradition in the decorative arts that also sheds light on the role women from different classes had, has yet to be written. For the US history on the topic see Carole Turbin, *Working Women of Collar City: Gender, Class, and Community in Troy, 1864–86* (University of Illinois Press, 1992); Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy. The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860–1930* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), and for the British history, see Barbara Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing* (Berg, 2000). In the arts of embroidery and lace, a local tradition linked to the social and economic history of a determined city and region existed. Usually aristocratic ladies had the role of supporting workshops of skilled women, most of them of modest origin, who produced wonderful crafts and decorations for dress and home. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several pattern books for lace and embroidery were published in Italy and Europe. This is the subject of Alessandra Mottola Molfino, ‘Nobili, Saggi e Virtuose Donne: Libri di Modelli per Merletti e Organizzazione del Lavoro femminile tra Cinquecento e Seicento’, in *La Famiglia e la Vita Quotidiana in Europa dal 400 al 600: Fonti e Problemi. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Milan, 1–4 December 1986* (Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali, Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato, Rome, 1986), pp. 276–93. According to Molfino, the pattern books for lace and embroidery, popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, reappear in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries when ladies from the upper bourgeoisie and aristocratic classes, in order to preserve handicrafts, helped to organise female crafts workshops. See also Marina Carmignani et al., *Ricami e Merletti nelle chiese e nei monasteri di Prato dal XVI al XIX secolo* (Prato, 1985).


17. The prejudices Genoni is addressing in her article have been dispelled only with the appearance of new approaches to gender studies and history in the late 1980s. For further reading on these issues, as linked to fashion and feminism, see C. Evans and Minna Thornton, *Women & Fashion: A New Look* (Quartet Books, 1989); Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams. Fashion and Modernity* (Virago, 1985); Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (Oxford University Press, 1985). I have also addressed the relationship between women, fashion and agency related to Italian feminism, in ‘Fashion as a Text: Talking about Femininity and Feminism’, in *Feminine Feminists: Cultural Practice in Italy*, ed. G. Miceli Jeffries (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

18. Enrico Crispolti, *Il Futurismo e la moda, Balla e gli altri* (Marsilio, 1986). See the introduction, ‘La Moda e il Futurismo’, and the references to the articles and interviews of Giacomo Balla that appeared in 1925 following the Paris Exhibition. In fact, Balla, visiting the exhibition and noticing so many objects and even the ceiling decoration of the salon of fashion, remarked: ‘Questo è un ballabile bello e buono! Ma che ci sia un Balla anche quaggiù?’ (p. 12).


20. Italy shared some similarities with other European countries in the proliferation of periodicals oriented towards a female audience. See Fiona Hackney, ‘Making Modern
31. My interview with Micol Fontana of June 2000 is to be published as an appendix in my forthcoming study, *Fashion Narratives*. 