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‘Toys and Perfumes’: Imploding Italy’s Population Paradox and Motherly Myths

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Barren States

The Population "Implosion" in Europe

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“Toys and Perfumes”: Imploding Italy’s Population Paradox and Motherly Myths

Elizabeth L. Krause

The dominant assumption in Europe is that low fertility is a serious problem. My work challenges the common alarmist framings of contemporary demographic trends, specifically those that depict as an illness the fertility rate of Italian women, which at 1.2 is among the lowest in the world. Rayna Rapp (1999: 317) has observed: “Reproduction lies at the heart of a culture’s representations of itself.” As such, those of us studying topics linked to reproduction are historians of the present. What are the symbolic as well as material consequences of population politics? What kind of histories are demographers constructing and are social scientists reproducing in people’s understandings of themselves and of the world when they/we depict populations as imploding? Furthermore, what does such language conceal?

Implode means “to burst inward”; it implies serious breakage. Consider this example: “when a vacuum tube breaks it implodes” (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*). To be able to burst inward requires an outside. It requires fixed boundaries; nations and the European Union both have fixed boundaries – or, at least, controlled boundaries subject to surveillance as well as to policy. No wonder this language of implosion “makes sense.”

To use the term “implode” in the context of population dynamics implies serious disruption, serious threat. It implies that something is deeply wrong.¹ Indeed, such phrases fuel fears and entice imaginings of a dying nation. The constant referent is the falling birthrate. This discourse of national decay is “a recurrent theme of nationalist discourse all over Europe” and masks as well as legitimizes other political agendas, including broad moralization processes, as Gal and Kligman (2000: 27, 29–31) point out. Such linguistic constructions pave the way for a fortress Europe in which xenophobia and racism become the order of the day (see Krause 2001: 594–598; 2005), in which aspirations of middle-class status seem inevitable, and in which rigid gender roles appear natural.

Headlines speak of “demographic desertification,” of a nation that “is old and without babies,” of “a crisis of births.” Media reports on population trends in Italy juxtapose “empty cradles” with a growing “immigrant supply,”² encouraging a mood of anxiety toward non-European newcomers. Prominent Italian demographers in a recent book *Il malessere demografico in Italia* (*The Demographic Malaise in Italy*), draw on a metaphor usually reserved for bodily health. As such, the term *malaise* implies that the national social body is suffering from an illness. A demographic trend has become a national pathology. Indeed, some demographers speak of an “excess” of low fertility and the pending “deformations” in the age structure (Golini, Mussino and Savioli 2000: 7, 98). They ponder the dangers that transmogrified generational rapports may pose to “adequate social cohesion” (p. 99). The Pope has also contributed to the clamor. During a historic and controversial address to the Italian Parliament, he spoke about the “crisis of births” as a “grave minaccia – serious threat” that weighs on the future of Italy (Drioli 2002: 3). Such forecasts ooze with assumptions about what a normal, healthy society looks like, one based on a same-sex nuclear family with “rational” parents who, if all were well, would procreate two children.

Italy has received a good deal of attention in the mainstream US press. A *New York Times* article entitled “Population Implosion Worries a Graying Europe” framed low fertility as an “epidemic.” The reporter located the etiology of this epidemic in women’s practice of “choosing work and education over having children” (Specter 1998). The article invoked disaster as it described birthrates in many countries as being “in a rapid, sustained decline. Never before – except in times of plague, war and deep economic depression – have birthrates fallen so low, for so long.” Another *New York Times* reporter characterized the situation as an “increasingly worrisome reality”; he visited a playground in Ferrara, Italy, filled with children and adoring parents, yet described there being “something wrong with the picture. Most of the parents were gazing at one, and only one, child” (Bruni 2002).

A sensibility of alarm spreads out across a terrain of uncertainty as it feeds into a politics of cultural struggle. The principle “fall guys” of this struggle, it turns out, are Italians of child-bearing age. A dominant framing of the problem suggests those men and, in particular, women are irrational family-makers (Golini 1991, 1994; Golini, De Simoni and Citoni 1995; Livi-Bacci 1994, Lori, Golini and Cantalini 1995; Volpi 1996). Another framing suggests that the perceived costs of having a child far outweigh the benefits, both in economic and non-economic terms, and hence having a child represents a lapse in rationality (Mazzucco and Ongaro 2003). One of Italy’s most prominent demographers has even asked whether Italians’ “hard refusal” to procreate might be similar to anorexic teenagers’ refusal to eat food (Livi-Bacci 1994: 14). Without naming women, women are implicated.³

Rational family-makers would produce at least 1.7 children, according to a scenario that prominent Italian demographer Antonio Golini and his colleagues have proposed. This is still below so-called replacement level of 2.1 children, but it assumes some immigration. Golini *et al.* (2000: 102–103) view increases in Italian birthrates as crucial for creating a viable and hence “normal” population structure in the future.⁴ To arrive at their scenario would require bucking the one-child family norm. A lot more women would have two and three children, and a whole lot fewer would have zero or one child. The most significant change would rest on those women without children: a decrease from the current estimates of 23 percent to 14 percent. Another large proportion of women – those with three children – would have to rise from the current 13 percent to 21 percent. I have argued elsewhere that the construction of the current low birthrate in Italy as a major population problem results in a sort of sneaky pronatalism. My ongoing research on this topic has revealed a move toward overt pronatalism complete with declarations and national family policies.

Fertility decline finds its roots in the nineteenth century. The regions with the earliest and most rapid decline were in the northern and central provinces of Piedmont, Liguria and Tuscany. By 1910–12, these regions had registered a decline in marital fertility of 25 percent, and they maintained the lowest rates through 1960–1962, according to Massimo Livi-Bacci (1977: 68). This aggregate work at the regional level tended to obscure important variations internal to a population, and the landmark study of Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider (1996) revealed the importance of class-based ideologies and practices for the timing of fertility decline. In Sicily, the gentry class began valuing and having small families at the end of the nineteenth century, the artisan class embraced a small-family ideology in the 1930s, and the peasant classes did so in the 1950s – all strategies to realize “respectability” (Schneider and Schneider 1991). Large to small families meant going from having between five and thirteen children before the first demographic transition to “two or, at most, three” thereafter (Schneider and Schneider 1992: 160; see Alter 1992, Kertzer 1993). By 1975, Italy’s so-called “period” total fertility rate was 2.21 (Figure 8.1). In 1980, it had fallen to 1.64. By 1990, Italian women’s fertility rate of 1.31 was reported along with that of Spanish women (1.39) to be “the lowest in the world” (Delgado Pérez and Livi-Bacci 1992). The trend took the public by surprise as both of these countries were thought to be Catholic and family centered, as well as relatively more patriarchal and less “feminist” than their northern counterparts.

Concern over declining fertility rates in Italy dates to the 1920s, when the dictator Mussolini promoted a demographic campaign that encouraged women to have numerous offspring to create a more populous and powerful nation as well as to populate Italy’s colonies in Africa. The fascist demographic policy was overtly pronatalist: taxing bachelors, awarding prolific mothers, outlawing abortion,

Figure 8.1 Total Fertility Rate, Italy, 1960–2002.

Source: Eurostat, Population and Social Conditions, Demography, Fertility Indicators, January 29, 2003.

banning contraceptives, restricting women's access to work. Ultimately, the campaign failed, as collectors of vital statistics continued to register a fall in the birthrates of Italian women between 1922 and 1944, the duration of the fascist regime (see de Grazia 1992; Krause 1994; Passerini 1987).

Demographers now seek to distance themselves from the overt pronatalism of the fascist years. They claim their primary concern has to do with a "deforming" population age structure and the social as well as economic challenges this may pose to society. Currently, of the 57 million Italians, 47.9 percent are between 15 and 49 years old, whereas 23.4 percent are over 60. Demographers forecast that by 2050, the Italian population will have declined to 38.2 million with 30 percent between 14 and 49 and 46 percent over 60. This is still a far cry from the most demographically "ill" localities whose age structures form an inverted pyramid (Golini *et al.* 2000: 31, 99). Population decline is common in the history of isolated areas. Witness, for example, the long history of "social malaise" and "hard life" as reflected in traumatic levels of emigration and trafficking in women wet-nurses (see in particular Dadà 1999).

This chapter draws attention to a particular moralizing effect of alarmist discourses. I seek to reveal what these strategies conceal with their heightened sense of the low birthrate as a problem. Such alarmist frames pressure women to procreate. I am not suggesting that women will give in to these pressures. But unlike the overt fascist campaign, which women and men largely resisted, this one is much more insidious. The clamoring over low fertility obscures the cultural expectations that prevent women from having on average more than one child – or from even daring to embark upon motherhood. The implosion-type stories conceal a major reason, I believe, that Italian women refrain from having the number of children that population scientists would deem "rational." In part, Italian mothers have on average one child not because juggling work with family has led them to "give up" on children, as is commonly implied.⁵ Rather, a so-called culture of responsibility dictates a specific and intense set of expectations for Italian mothers (Saraceno 1996: 143–148). The *doveri di madre*, or motherly obligations, result from cultural struggles that connect with gender, class as well as ethnicity and "race." These struggles have become deeply connected to Italy's population paradox: while much of the world continues to worry about overpopulation, Italy and much of Europe ponder predictions of population decline.

Of Fieldwork, Women's Work and Family-making

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Tuscany, a region of central Italy described as having "broad and diffuse demographic malaise" (Golini *et al.* 2000: 225). I lived and worked in the Province of Prato for 22 months from October 1995 to August 1997, and returned there in June 1999 as well as in November 2002. The towns where I engaged in participant observation had a long history of integrated agriculture and industrial work.

For more than six months in 1996, during my second year of fieldwork, I toiled as an apprentice making sweaters. Tuscany's sweater industry was dominated by small to medium-sized family firms, and I believed locating myself in this sector would be a useful way to get a handle on the cultural politics of family-making there.

A politically active woman whom I call Carolina helped me secure my first apprenticeship. I worked for no pay (since I had a research grant) in a family-run sweater factory that made and sold high-end men's sweaters. After a couple of months, tensions resulted from my co-workers' view that their boss was exploiting me. I shared my problems with Carolina, and she offered a solution: come work for her. I accepted her invitation and assumed my station next to Carolina and her husband, a retired state employee, in their family-finishing firm. They subcontracted with several larger *maglifici*, or sweater companies, in the industrial district of Prato. Our job was to finish the sweaters with buttons and buttonholes. A room

of the house was designated for this intensive labor. I received a small hourly wage and, in addition, a delicious hot meal, which contrary to the gendered division of labor in most Italian households, Carolina's husband prepared daily. Perhaps it was one victory in Carolina's ongoing struggle to create a democratic household.

The Province of Prato is significant as a research site for examining fertility dynamics for several reasons. First, it exists within Tuscany, a region where the average number of children per woman was 1.0 as of 1995. Second, Prato is not demographically extreme in terms of its age structure and hence in this respect represents a practical case study. The textile-based economy of Prato and its environs has made for a rather dynamic demographic context relative to isolated towns. In the 1950s and 1960s, peasants from the South and from Tuscany's hinterlands were drawn to the area's booming industry. Since the early 1990s, the area has attracted immigrants from outside Europe, the largest group being from China, and in 2002 Chinese women's births accounted for 11 percent of the total in the hospital of Prato.⁶ The vibrant economy along with the immigrant population make for a less demographically "compromised" area, hence with only "moderate malaise," as Golini and his colleagues describe it (Golini *et al.* 2000: 225). Third, the Province of Prato itself consists of a territory where women have historically been workers in the global economy and hence issues of women's work have long been, and continue to be, of central concern and import.⁷ The popular press and demographic experts often frame Italian women's participation in the labor force as new. Indeed, Delgado Pérez and Livi-Bacci (1992) hypothesized that the "massive entry" of Italian as well as Spanish women into the paid workforce in the 1970s was a primary force behind recent sharp declines in average births per woman. Such arguments discount the importance of women's work before the 1970s.

In the Province of Prato, the significant and historic role of women in the straw hat industry exemplifies the cyclical yet often hidden history of Italian women in the labor force. This hat industry was predominant in the area from the mid-1800s well into the 1930s. A tourist guidebook of Tuscany from 1904 observes: "Prato of today has of course its praiseworthy modern enterprise and industries: the women are picturesquely busy at every street corner with straw plaiting; there is a good trade in woolen cloths" (Sheldon and Newell 1904: 46).⁸ Ortaggi Cammarosano (1991) notes a disappearance of working women nationwide from official statistics between 1871 and 1891. In 1871, a category called "unspecified employment" contained over 4 million women. State functionaries eliminated this category ten years later, and grouped these women as housewives, a category that leaped from 393,839 persons in 1871 to 3.7 million by 1881. Writes Ortaggi Cammarosano (1991: 158): "Hundreds of thousands of women from the lower classes who added some form of productive work to their household duties in order to balance family budgets now figured, in statistical terms, simply as 'massaie,' or housewives."

Records from one provincial hamlet revealed that of 395 households in 1931, 86.4 percent of homes had at least one adult woman listed as having a profession, and the vast majority of those were *trecciaiole*, or straw weavers.⁹ This aspect of a globalized rural economy was based on domicile labor involving women who often came together in household workshops. These weavers' labors were crucial to household, local and global economies, yet their work was highly devalued, especially by the men, as one report on women's work from 1893 stated.¹⁰

And now on to a story that explains the title of this chapter.

Of Toys and Perfumes

A popular Italian song from the 1930s, "*Balocchi e Profumi*" or "Toys and Perfumes," comments on the cultural expectations of motherhood as it warns of the consequences that await the self-centered, consuming, overly sexed mother (Figure 8.1). I heard the song on two memorable occasions while doing fieldwork in the Province of Prato. The first time, I was sewing buttons on sweaters while working in a home-based workshop with Carolina, a powerful and outspoken woman in her mid-fifties. Politically active in local government, Carolina was the mother of three children, two sons and a daughter in their twenties, all of whom were then living at home. She and her husband's finishing firm provided one site for my ethnographic fieldwork. We broke for lunch each day around 1 o'clock. There in the kitchen above an heirloom chest hung a portrait of a woman hunched over a lap of straw plaits. Carolina had painted her grandmother in a moment of fashioning the plaits into attractive straw hats. Carolina sang of a "shop window aglow with toys and perfumes," and of a mother who ignored her child. She laughed about her tone-deafness and recalled her grandmother really singing the song as she wove the straw plaits.

The second time, I was throwing a music party at the farmhouse we rented fall 1996 to summer 1997. A guitarist friend played "Toys and Perfumes," and most of the dozen Italian guests sang along. One of those guests, anthropologist Massimo Bressan,¹¹ took me aside and said with insistence, "This song is important!" I tracked down the words of the song with the help of the guitarist, Maurizio Geri. A performer of Tuscan folk songs as well as Django Reinhardt-style swing (Geri 1997), Geri had found the lyrics in an obscure little songbook by E.A. Mario (dated 1930) after years of casual searching.

The song's parable of motherly immorality and the price of transgression begins with a vivid description of a mother and her little girl entering a boutique, where the mother buys only powder and cologne for herself and ignores her child. The mother's indulgences continue in the second verse, where we learn of the woman's bourgeois tastes: "the living room rich with pillows of silk." The child watches as her mother "offers her ripe lip to sin." In the third, and last, verse, the exiled child

Balocchi e Profumidi E. A. Mario
1930

Edizioni E. A. Mario, Napoli

I.

Tutta sfolgorante è la vetrina
piena di balocchi e profumi . . .
Entra con la mamma la bambina
tra lo sfolgorio di quei lumi . . .
— Comanda, signora? —
— Cipria e colonia Coty . . .
— “Mamma!”
— mormora la bambina
mentre pieni di pianto ha gli occhi
— per la tua piccolina
non compri mai balocchi . . .

Mamma,
tu compri soltanto i profumi per te!”

II.

Ella, nel salotto profumato
ricco di cuscini di seta,
porge il labbro tumido al peccato,
mentre la bambina indiscreta
dischiude, quel nido
pieno d'odor di Coty . . .
— “Mamma!”
— mormora la bambina
mentre pieni di pianto ha gli occhi
— per la tua piccolina
non compri mai balocchi . . .

Mamma,
tu compri soltanto i profumi per te!”

III.

Esile, agonizza la bambina . . .
Or la mamma non è più ingrata:
corre a vuotar tutta la vetrina
per la sua figliuola malata . . .
— Amore mio bello,
ecco i balocchi per te . . .
— “Grazie”
— mormora la bambina!
Ma il capo già rechina,
e già socchiude gli occhi . . .
Piange la mamma, pentita, stringendola al
cor!

Toys and Perfumes**I.**

The shop window aglow in a whirl
brimming with toys and perfumes
The little girl enters with her mamma
amidst the glow of that luminous room
May I help you, ma'am?
Sure Coty, face powder and cologne . . .
“Mamma!”
murmurs the child
her eyes welling up with tears
“for your little one
you never buy toys . . .

Mamma,
you buy only perfumes for yourself.”

II.

She, perfumed in the living room
rich with pillows of silk,
offers her ripe lip to sin
while the indiscreet little girl
discloses that nest
full of the smell of Coty . . .
“Mamma!”
murmurs the child
her eyes welling up with tears
“for your little one
you never buy toys . . .

Mamma,
you buy only perfumes for yourself.”

III.

Exiled, the child agonizes . . .
the mother is no longer neglectful:
She runs to empty the entire store window
for her ill, darling little girl . . .
My beautiful love
here are the toys for you . . .
“Thank you,”
murmurs the child!
But her head already reclines
and her eyes already shut . . .
The mother cries, repents, squeezing the
child to her heart!

grows sick from agony and neglect; her mother finally attends to the child but it is too late. For the irresponsible, neglectful mother, the lyrics suggest the most severe of punishments: the death of her child. This mother paid a heavy price for her fleshly and material indulgences.

Carolina had flavored her version of the song with irony rather than moralizing, for she viewed positively young women's *egoismo*, or self-centeredness. She reasoned that thinking about themselves prevented women from falling so quickly into subordinate, self-sacrificing roles of mother and caretaker. Certainly, her critique of the current low birthrate is a quiet one in the loud voices that clamor on about the “problem” of the *bassissima*, or very low, level of fertility.

The story portrayed in “Toys and Perfumes” prefigures the current culture of responsibility that surrounds Italian motherhood. In other words, the song serves as a moral trope against which subsequent notions of responsible motherhood are constructed. This trope erases the history of women as workers and idealizes them as mothers. It is to the persistent consequences of this moralizing trope that we now turn.

Of Culture and Responsibility

During the second year of fieldwork, I joined a group of women who met for coffee each morning after dropping off their children at the elementary school where my daughter attended first grade. One morning an unkempt man approached our table:

“What do you all do here?” he asked. “You're incredible. Why, you meet here every morning.”

“*Si prende un caffè insieme* — we have a coffee together,” replied Chiara, the mother of three who finished sweaters in her home. “In this way, we're better able to face the day.”

“What *mestiere*, or trade, do you do?” he continued.

“*Mestiere di mamma* — the craft of motherhood,” replied Anna, a mother who worked in the giftshop trade.

“*Mestiere di mamma?*” the man repeated. “I've never heard of mothering as a trade, a profession.”

“You've never heard of it?” she asked in disbelief. “It's as old as the world!” (Fieldnotes, 28 February 1997)

The mothers discussed various aspects of the craft of motherhood during the eight months we met informally over coffee. These women taught me about the meanings and demands specific to the central Italian variety of the culture of responsibility. Raising children has assumed particular weight and character in the postwar setting of upwardly mobile Italy. Many people in the rural-industrial

Figure 8.2 *Balocchi e Profumi* (Toys and Perfumes)

crossroads where I worked flaunted newfound wealth, as manifested through presentations of self and children, yet they simultaneously embraced selected aspects of the peasant past, as expressed through certain eating and healing practices.¹² In either case, the time, energy and thought invested in feeding, educating, clothing and healing children – from infants well into adulthood – was immense, and the implications for middle-class respectability were heavy.¹³ In this chapter, I develop only one example: clothing children. It relates to the presentation and maintenance of the child and provides a sense of how Italian women, in particular, experience the culture of responsibility. While this example involves peculiar cultural practices rooted in Prato, I am convinced that similar examples of the culture of responsibility can be found elsewhere in Italy. With William Blake, I maintain that the world presents itself most lucidly in grains of sand, and for those granules I look to the details of daily life.

As I participated in daily life, I was continuously struck by the cleanliness of the houses, the neatness of the children, the precision of their clothes:¹⁴ the delicate collars trimmed with lace or finished edging; the fine fabrics perfectly laundered and ironed. Granted, I was a graduate student who had lived for the previous three years in the very casual western desert city of Tucson, Arizona, so while I, too, juggled my roles as researcher, mother and wife, my standards of presentation with regard to my 4-and-a-half-year-old daughter were far below those of my Italian consultants. Indeed, as fieldwork progressed, I became increasingly self-conscious about my own parental habits of dressing and fussing over my daughter.

Children wore smocks where my daughter attended public preschool and first grade during 1995–1997. Parents found it helpful and convenient because “*ci vuole tanto a vestire un figliolo ogni giorno*,” or it takes a lot to dress a child every day. In other words, a lot of domestic labor was required to ensure clothes not only matched (fabric as well as color was important), but that they were perfectly clean, orderly and ironed – a necessity in a place where everybody air-dried laundry on lines or drying racks. Dressing on Sundays, especially for outings, was important *per fare figura*, so that one makes a good impression.

Central to understanding the attention and energy that went into dressing children was the concept of *fare figura*, or to make an impression, or *fare una bella figura*, to make a good impression. The emphasis on *fare figura* is well known in Italy. Any observant tourist to Florence or Rome will have noticed the well-clothed Italian shoppers on weekdays or the even better-clad promenaders on Sundays. Obviously fashions change, and in the eight years of my research I have noticed a turn toward casual dress – though as of fall 2004 it remained a studied and stylish version of casual. Italy is a densely populated peninsula, and most Italians live in close proximity with one another. Individuals have a great deal of daily contact with others, whether in the piazza, at the market, the *bar*, the hairdresser's, a friend's or relative's house, or in line at the city hall or bank (an Italian

adult spends on average twenty-eight days per year waiting in line). I suggest making a good impression has a specific meaning in the Prato area, where there is a convergence of intimate knowledge of the textile industry, heightened awareness of the fashion trade, and keen memory of social inferiority. After all, Prato's wealth emerged out of trade in rags and recycled fibers. Prato is located just 20 kilometers northeast of Florence and has long been in the cultural shadow of its Renaissance rival.

My initiation into the local norms of dressing a child and the quotidian art of laundering came through Nicoletta, the widow whose apartment I lived in, with my husband and daughter, the first year of my fieldwork. Nicoletta had migrated from rural southern Italy with her husband and two daughters to the industrializing periphery of Prato in the early 1960s. Nicoletta's family epitomized the demographic transition to low fertility. Her octogenarian mother had six children; she had two; neither of her children have had or intend to have children. At the time of my laundry “lesson,” I received some pointers as well from Luisa, then 41, Nicoletta's oldest and married daughter:

Luisa caught a glimpse of me as I finished hanging out laundry on the patio. From the stairs bordering Nicoletta's flower garden, she asked, “Did you finish already?”

“Well, yes,” I said proudly. “I'm that fast.”

Nicoletta walked over and cast a disapproving glance as she caught glimpse of stains on my daughter's drying T-shirt. The stains were months old. She took the shirt and said, “I'll show you how to get them out.” She scrubbed the stains with a special bar of laundry soap.

“Like this,” she said. “*Se no, non fa figura* – If not, she won't make an impression. *I bambini italiani portano vestiti bianchi bianchi* – Italian children wear white, white clothes.”

I tried it. The soap in my hand felt as slippery as a fish. Luisa came in, and I pleaded, “Don't watch me.” I took a sleeve of the shirt and rubbed it with soap. My hands felt awkward. I laughed. She laughed at me.

“Take the whole shirt!” Luisa instructed, bemused by my incompetence.

I started to jump around. “Let's do gymnastics!” I was much more comfortable moving my whole body than my wet hands. The soap slipped, the wet shirt moved against me. I lacked coordination in hands-on everyday laundering. What a curiosity I surely was. A 33-year-old woman who could hardly keep a bar of laundry soap under control and who could not get her child's shirt white.

Nicoletta could. When she was finished, the colors of the imprinted teacups were still vivid and the shirt was bright white. She became the laundry magician, a legend in my daughter's memory. (Fieldnotes, 9 December 1995)

Strong social pressure favored white clothes. They showed that you had the resources and the decency to keep your child not only in clean clothes but also in well-ironed, white ones. The responsibility for carrying out this domestic work

rested largely on mothers; even those women I knew who employed domestic help oversaw the laundering. The power of whiteness surely went beyond color. As a hue, white is symbolically often associated with purity, honor, virtue and even beauty. Richard Dyer (1997) observes generally about whiteness in modern times, "To be white is to have expunged all dirt, faecal or otherwise, from oneself: to look white is to look clean" (Dyer 1997: 76; see also pp. 64–68). In central Italy, it was as though morality became grafted onto the child through clothing, and the mother was ultimately responsible for this purified presentation of self. As Italians who had migrated from the impoverished South and who had vivid memories of anti-southern prejudice from native Tuscans, Nicoletta and Luisa may have felt acutely the "necessity" to demonstrate their morality through the whiteness of clothes.

Similarly, their need to socialize me into the dominant norms of laundering and of mothering derived from the fact that my presence and my habits reflected on them. I was a foreign newcomer to the neighborhood and as such an outsider whom the neighbors initially viewed with suspicion. Hence, it was important for Nicoletta's and Luisa's reputation that I learn how to be a respectable member of the community and to make sure my daughter donned not only clean clothes but stainless, white ones.

The presentation of the child echoes in the commonly stated dictum *stare dietro a un figliolo* – literally, to stay behind a child, to follow them, to guide them. As time passed, I began to feel strange about leaving my then 5-year-old daughter to dress herself, something she had been doing since attending preschool in Tucson, where her morning routine involved putting on whatever fanciful combination of clothing she so desired. Even mismatched clothes were celebrated as a show of the child's independence, choice and creativity in her Tucson preschool context. But in Prato, even my daughter began to notice that the children did not dress themselves. One evening when I returned from my volunteer shift at a community pizzeria to fetch my daughter from a friend's house, the mother of the other child got out my daughter's coat and helped her put it on. My daughter usually put on her own coat – at least she used to. I was suddenly finding her expecting me to dress her, to choose her clothes, just as she saw her little Italian friends' mothers doing for them.

Children internalized the importance of precision as a value. When we met my daughter's first friend, Irene was standing on the other side of a rock wall in a large yard with a vegetable garden and a field with grapevines and olive trees. She was casting us a curious but careful glance, made all the more powerful by her appearance: her dress was stylish and perfectly clean, and she herself was statuesquely groomed.

One day I was teaching the girls to do figure eights with their bikes in the dead-end street next to a soccer field. The game ended after a power struggle over the rules of play, and my daughter pedaled her mini-mountain bike over to a rocky parking lot. "You shouldn't ride your bike there," Irene said. "It will ruin the tires."

My daughter continued riding, her bike's large tires moving through the rocks. "I'm not like you," Irene said. "*Io sono una bambina precisa* – I'm a precise child." (Fieldnotes, 19 September 1996)

It struck me that a 7-year-old girl had already internalized the value of being precise and exacting. Irene's mother, Carlotta, was a good teacher. She was very disciplined in terms of how the house was kept, the time of day and day of week when she gave Irene her bath (Saturday evenings around 7 o'clock), and how orderly Irene's clothes were kept: the carefully selected and perfectly ironed dresses in her closet would have met the standards of the most well-kept boutique. As Americans, our Italian friends told us we were *disinvolti*, or laid back, in terms of our hands-off parenting style and our casual way of dressing.¹⁵

The emphasis many central Italian mothers put into dressing their children, I suggest, is linked to their heightened consciousness of fashion, to a culture that values stylistic presentations of self, and to the specific peasant-cum-artisan/entrepreneur social experience so common in Prato. Style, and the style of children, become important vehicles for expressing social identity. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 172) has pointed out, "social identity is defined and asserted through difference." The difference being asserted much of the time is one that creates distance from that most hideous of inferior social locations: *miseria* or poverty.

Carlotta, the mother of only-child Irene, explained to me the pressure she felt to have everything – clothes, food, house – in perfect order. She and her husband felt ambivalent about the possibility of having a second child. The couple through the 1990s managed a family sweater firm. Carlotta, then 38, her husband, his brother and mother worked within the firm; various stages of sweater-finishing were outsourced to other small firms or individuals. The family lived in a graciously restored farmhouse: Carlotta, her husband and daughter occupied one floor, and the widowed mother-in-law and her eldest bachelor son the other. The *maglificio*, or sweater firm, was located in one wing of the home. A theme of social status and public displays of it emerged one day as Carlotta and her mother-in-law spoke to me about their lives. I jotted down the talk:

"Everything has to be a name brand. Last year Irene (then gearing up to enter third grade) had a backpack that cost 30,000 lira [US\$18.00]. All the kids looked at her, so this year I spent 130,000 lira [US\$78.00] and got her a Sailor Moon backpack, the type used in middle school. Otherwise you're looked upon as *genterella*" [or a low-class or disresponsible person].

"Ah," her mother-in-law chimed in, "they're all really *genterella*."

"Of course they are," said Carlotta. "But everybody wants to cover it up, to show the next person up." (Fieldnotes, 28 June 1997)

This passage suggests that Carlotta sought to avoid a sense of social inferiority for herself as well as her daughter.¹⁶ Social status powerfully shaped Carlotta's sense of personal identity and self worth. With such an emphasis on the acquisition of expensive material goods, coupled with a culture of responsibility in which a great deal of attention is placed on the details of laundering, ironing, clothing, feeding, healing and educating, the thought of more than one child seemed beyond reach. It is worth noting that demographers' official surveys cite Italian women as those with the largest gap between children desired (an average of two) and those actually had (an average of one) (Delgado Pérez and Livi-Bacci 1992).

Such displays of fashion and style validate bourgeois, or middle-class, consumer values, and I would argue that the acceptance of *fare figura*, of making a good impression, can be connected to a broader hegemonic project that benefits a ruling political-economic elite. Yet all of the elite do not participate in the same way, and this reflects the way in which one's style cannot be reduced to one's class position (Mouffe 1981: 231). Consider that in my fieldsite the adult daughter of the best-known noble family was chastised (behind her back) by working-class and middle-class parents for the sloppy way she dressed her children and the messy house she was reputed to keep. She was not participating in the stylistic performances that those of the newly moneyed classes found so important.

The acute attention to dressing children exemplifies "contradictory consciousness" (Gramsci 1971: 333) because for working-class mothers to live up to bourgeois Italian-style notions of self-presentation, these presentation regimes require tremendous amounts of work on the part of women. And yet at the level of every day, these practices become "necessary," part of the "common sense" required to send children out into the world of social relations. Differences between classes in the capitalist world of consumer culture become transmuted "into distinctions of virtue and merit," as Eric Wolf pointed out (1982: 389–390; see also Wolf 1999). "Success is demonstrated by the ability to acquire valued commodities; hence, inability to consume signals social defeat." Ability to consume signals social victory. Ensuring social victory in a new moneyed context rests on both parents, but the performance of it rests most heavily on women.¹⁷

When one examines the details of daily life and the culture of responsibility, it is difficult to make sense of claims that "the interests of women are intrinsically at odds with the interests of babies and with the population" (Golini *et al.* 2000: 104). Here, the interests of women refer to contemporary women's pursuit of education, careers and leisure activities. In an effort to diffuse their blame-placing on women, the researchers portray the demographic crisis as the manifestation of a "profound and generalized crisis of values that does everything but support procreative choice." They suggest that "women though not only women but also couples . . . remain imprisoned within the play of social pressures and the drive toward individualism" (Golini *et al.* 2000: 104). Such strategies deny the demands of the

culture of responsibility and the struggles that women have waged toward gender equality within and beyond their doorsteps.

Of Civilizing Motherhood

Sociologists Marzio Barbagli (1996 [1984]: 387–92) and Chiara Saraceno (1996: 143–48) trace the rise of these *doveri di madre*, or motherly obligations, to modernity and namely to the birth of the privatized, "modern" family to the 1600s; characteristics of this modern family only become fully realized among the bourgeois and aristocratic classes in the 1800s. Among the Italian popular classes, the modern family develops much later – well into the twentieth century (Saraceno 1996: 144–45).

The modern family form represented a break from the patriarchal model, which began to unravel in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Hierarchical social distance between husband and wife lessened as it did between parents and children. The transformation acquired a class character, moving first through the intellectual bourgeoisie (late 1700s and early 1800s), then catching hold among the aristocrats (1850s to early 1900s), next affecting bureaucrats, merchants, artisans and industrial workers, and finally transforming social relations among the agricultural classes. The change followed this class-based course, according to Barbagli, because of a crisis of the *ancien regime* and accompanying transformations in the political-economic system. Barbagli (1996: 26) suggests that just as the rigid asymmetries between classes were diminishing, so too were the asymmetries breaking down within households. The peasant classes eventually followed suit, and by the postwar era, as agricultural reforms took hold and the peasant sharecropping system unraveled, the formal patriarchal family gave way to more egalitarian models (Saraceno 1996: 145).

These egalitarian models, however, have not been fully realized particularly in terms of gender equality. In fact, the culture of responsibility reflects one aspect of the double burden in terms of professional and domestic/affective work that rests on women. Saraceno argues that the modern family, as a unit of sentiment and of education, finds its core meaning in two interdependent figures: the mother and the child. This model identifies the woman as mother not only in the biological sense but also in affective and educative terms; she is expected to participate in educative and moral projects (Saraceno 1996: 145).

New norms for childrearing accompanied the modern view of the family. New attention was given to bodily comportment, moral and intellectual education, medical practices, hygiene and dietary norms. These standards brought about new expectations for mothering. The practice of giving children over to wetnurses, for example, became recast in terms of "indifference, frigidness, and vanity on the part of mothers" (Saraceno 1996: 146; see also Dadà 1999). These very themes

were echoed in the popular song "Toys and Perfumes." The refrain describing the little tearful girl who murmurs, "for your little one you never buy toys," cast against the self-indulgent mother who neglects the girl's health reminds that responsible mothers are self-sacrificing ones.

In short, new regimes for childrearing were part and parcel of a "civilizing process," a term now broadly associated with the work of Norbert Elias (1994). The point I wish to make is that the burden of socializing children according to the norms and morals of this "civilizing process" was largely placed on mothers. Indeed, it still is.

Of Confronting Class "Necessities"

Women who face the culture of responsibility and who adhere to its dictates are caught in the "fissures" of a class structure that they do not comfortably fit into (after Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 58).¹⁸ The early-twentieth-century *signore*, or elites, had access to far greater resources than average women who today emulate in part their standards of hygiene, education, clothing, feeding and childrearing. Those elite women had a lot of domestic help, including wetnurses from poor villages, so as to continue their society lives (Dadà 1999: 26).

The new-moneyed Province of Prato is a sort of mimetic place where people joked that you live for your house rather than having a house to live in, and where commodity acquisition served to distance oneself and one's children from the "hard life" and its *genterella*, or low-class folks. New-moneyed people there knew well their closeness to *genterella*. In many cases, these adults of child-bearing age were the sons and daughters of one-time peasants, peasant-weavers turned sweater-makers, or southern Italian migrants. One day while taking a *passaggiata*, or walk, with my longtime confidante Luisa, we passed by the large house of a relative – half of which nobody lived in. Luisa thought it showy. She said, "*Si nasce nobile, non si diventa nobile* – You're born nobility, you don't become nobility" (Fieldnotes 14 November 2002). Her statement illustrated how people become caught in class fissures as they try to one-up their class background.

I suggest the ideologies of class that shape the culture of responsibility impinge not only on mothers but on would-be mothers as well. Attending to domestic tasks and keeping husbands presentable (shopping, laundering and ironing clothes) already kept such women running. The unpaid domestic work that such women performed for the benefit of their husbands revealed consent to gender and class ideologies rooted in old patriarchal forms. Patriarchy continued to be reproduced through what people did and said. The rigid patriarchal family form had disappeared but it had left visible traces. Yet women also derived power and respect from their well-nurtured and impressive men folk, just as Italian women have long

since derived power from food (Counihan 1988; Krause 1999: 137–147, 255–262; Ochs, Pontecorvo and Fasulo 1996).

Women without children looked around them and took note of the expectations of motherhood. Many were hesitant to take the plunge. Some women emphasized they postponed marriage because they feared their boyfriends really wanted a substitute mother. A number of women who married but who claimed to have chosen not to have children pointed to their personality – of "being too nervous," of not having the "right character." I have space here only to say that this perceived character flaw raises the question of the constraints Italian women have on their ability to choose. Was the explanation of "nervousness" a painful consequence of conforming to middle-class expectations of modern motherhood that place a premium on order? I could not help but see some women's nervousness and fixation over cleanliness as connected with their personal histories of coming from subaltern classes or regions. These histories were common in the new-moneyed environs of Prato – even the new-moneyed peninsula of Italy. Women's sense of responsibility in terms of living up to what was expected of them commonly manifested itself in the form of a constant sense of being on-edge. I so often heard women say, "*Non ce la faccio più* – I can't do it anymore." It sounded like a mantra.

But, it was not everyone's mantra. In late December 1996, a university-age cousin of Luisa's invited me to go with her to the beach town of Viareggio for a dinner party. She had complained to me about her mother and that generation's fastidious and obsessive attention to the house, to the point that it almost became a pathology. So I was particularly struck when, in the middle of unwrapping sausages that the men were preparing to grill outside, the women friends poured themselves some champagne and toasted themselves: "*A noi ganzissime donne, perchè non si pensa sempre alla pulizia*," or, "To us ultracool women because we don't always think about cleaning!"

Of Consequences and Adjustments

If we listen closely to the alarmist language of demographers and the media concerning Italy's "super-low" fertility, we may recognize something familiar: contemporary women sound an awful lot like the self-indulgent mother figure in "Toys and Perfumes." Recall Golini and his colleagues' assessment that women's interests "are intrinsically at odds with the interests of babies and the population" (2000: 104). In this version of the story, women in particular have become like that figure in the song: prisoners of rampant individualism. The alarm ringing suggests that not only are they neglecting to have a "rational" number of children, they are neglecting to sufficiently replenish the nation.

This chapter is intended as a historical corrective to the current project of myth-making now underway: specifically, that because women put their own "interests"

before those of their offspring, realized or would-be, they are to blame for the demographic "implosion." Demographers and the media have repeatedly implied that women's work is antithetical to having children. So let us consider the effects of such alarmist language on the so-called perpetrators of low fertility themselves: the "native" women, especially those born between 1950 and 1975.

The alarmist language relies on imaginings of a historical woman who was a non-working, non-participant in local and global economies. This is a myth born of the liberal nineteenth century, ripened during the fascist era, and harvested in the postwar period: the myth that women didn't work "before" seems to have really taken hold among what Italians call the popular classes in the 1960s. This myth about how women "used to be" speaks loudly about what women's practices and performances should look like: dedicated only to being self-sacrificing mothers. These explanations persist even though it is well documented that Italian women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had not only a conspicuous but a predominant role in industry, and birthrates were much higher than they are now. The notion that women are "naturally" mothers and not workers has become a tale that is being reseeded via these cacophonous depictions of Italy's low birthrate. In portraying women as non-workers, the alarmism solidifies the cultural space for a non-working *mother* figure.

This type of mother figure is essential to the politics of cultural struggle now ongoing in central Italy, and elsewhere, related to population dynamics. What is paradoxical about this situation is that while the rest of the world worries itself about too much population, much of Europe concerns itself about too little population. In both places, however, there is acute alarmism. This fact might signal to us that the field of population is a highly charged one and a site for normalization. When the Pope speaks about the grave birth crisis, he speaks from a specific political position. The Catholic Church remains opposed to birth control, including condoms and the pill, as well as abortion.¹⁹

Are women – and couples – caught in a prison of individualism? Or are they caught in a prison of social structures that demand they perform gender, class and whiteness in particular ways? Alarmist population rhetoric reinforces old tropes about women "naturally" being mothers. It conceals cultural struggles against patriarchal-ordered gender regimes that are implicitly related to Italy's population paradox. Alarms about demographic malaise erase the culture of responsibility that shapes the lived realities in which Italian women, as mothers, raise their children. In particular, the incessant talk of implosion casts women's daily activities related to *social* reproduction once again into the shadows. Finally, I have implicated alarmist demographic discourses as depicting Italian women as irrational family-makers. This is a not-so story; rather, these women are busy conforming to other normalizing gender role demands and adjusting to fissures related to their uneasy locations in shifting class structures as they figure out how they must, by

"necessity," manipulate the symbols of a new-moneyed world to their and their children's advantages.

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Notes

1. See Bruni (2002).
2. All translations are mine. "Italia? Vecchia e senza bambini," *La Stampa*, July 25, 1997, p. 17. Thanks to Italian anthropologist Massimo Bressan for providing me with this article. "Culle più vuote, l'Italia cresce solo per l'apporto degli immigrati," *La Nazione*, June 27, 1997, p. 7. See also Drioli (2002).
3. Demographers use only women to track births and Total Fertility Rates. See, for example, the landmark Princeton Fertility Project (Coale and Watkins 1986).
4. The typical fertility rate cited for replacement of a given population is a TFR of 2.2; however, Golini *et al.* (2000) cite a rate based on complex demographic calculations, including immigration, that reflect their notion of what the minimum level of natality would be to avoid demographic "deformation" in the next 25 to 50 years.
5. An "explanation" about Italy's demographic dynamic first published in the *New York Times* now appears on a website of a women's organization as the

"truth" about the situation. In that article, a University of Bologna professor told reporter Michael Specter:

women of Italy have the worst of both worlds. They now work for a living in record numbers, but tremendous obstacles remain for balancing work and family life. Far more than places like Sweden, France or even the United States, the Italian man still seeks a wife who will make his dinner every night and who takes complete charge of the family. Women responded by realizing that with only 24 hours in each day something has to give. Children seem to have become that something. (Specter 1998)

By chance in fall 2001, I came across this quote on the website of the Women's Environment and Development Organization. The authors of an article about Italian women's low fertility used the quote to explain why Italian women's fertility rates are so low. Two things struck me about the deployment of this quote. First, it implies that women are not investing in children. In practice, quite the reverse appears to be the case. They have fewer children but invest heavily in each one. This is where dominant notions about gender morality intersect with dominant schemes of middle-class respectability (Schneider and Schneider 1996). Second, even the women's group participates in the historical amnesia about Italian women as workers: the construction of the historical non-working woman figure, the idea of work as something novel for Italian women, is a myth. See the excellent critical work on this theme by Pescarolo (1995), Pescarolo and Ravenni (1991) and Ortaggi Cammarosano (1991).

6. Fieldnote, "02.11.10 breastfeeding, global." My thanks to Dott. Francesco De Ninno for facilitating interviews with several hospital personnel in the maternity ward in November 2002.
7. In Golini *et al.*'s (2000: 225) scheme, Prato falls in the category of commune most strongly industrialized and with the highest levels of employment, total as well as female. Of the "active" population, the official employment rate is 94 percent. Of the total population, 41.2 percent are employed. Of the total female population, 29.7 percent are employed. The numbers derive from Istat data from 1991.
8. Thanks to Peter McLaughlin for this reference from his library.
9. I consulted household records in the historic archive of Carmignano, which was then part of the Province of Florence: Archivio Storico di Carmignano, Foglio di famiglia, VII Censimento Generale della Popolazione, 21 Aprile 1931, Provincia di Firenze, Comune di Carmignano, Frazione di Comeana.
10. Thanks to Silvano Gelli (1996, 1998), who was doing archival research at the same time that I was, for his assistance in deciphering this document. Archivio Storico di Carmignano, Categoria III, no. 93; Fascicolo no. 13, Filza 2, Agosto 30 1893.

11. See Bressan (1997).
12. One thinks of Raymond Williams' (1977) notion of selective tradition. See Roseberry's insightful discussion (1989: 26–27).
13. For more on respectability as related to fertility decline, see Schneider and Schneider (1991).
14. Fieldnote, "97.01.19 stare in dietro."
15. Fieldnote, "09.19.96 bambina."
16. The noun *gente* means people, and the suffix *-ella* indicates a negative, a lack. In this particular context, the word suggests material lack and likely points to a peasant past, a time in which commodities and education were scarce.
17. See Kemp and Bono (1993) and Passerini (1996) for discussions of the feminist movement and gender struggles in Italy.
18. In the Comaroffs' ethnography of Nonconformist missionaries and Tswana peoples of South African, the missionaries are caught in these fissures, "suspended uneasily between the privileged and the impoverished" in nineteenth-century bourgeois British society. Also noteworthy for my argument is the authors' mention of emergent gender ideologies over the "woman problem": that "ladies of bourgeois class [were] ever more restricted to the roles of wife and mother" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 69). This gender ideology seems to be making its way across Europe in the nineteenth-century; it seems to go hand in hand with the transition from protoindustrialism to industrial capitalism, at least in Europe, and in certain colonial contexts, such as South Africa. Perhaps encounters in the colonies were giving form to hegemonies in the metropole, as Stoler (1995) has convincingly argued about sexuality.
19. For the Church's official view of contraception and sex education, see <http://www.vatican.va/>, accessed June 12, 2003. In southern Africa, Roman Catholic bishops condemned the use of condoms to protect against the spread of HIV/AIDS; see "Church rejects plea on condoms," July 30, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1465326.stm>, accessed June 12, 2003. See also Gunther Simmermacher, "The Condom Debate," *The Southern Cross*, July 18, 2001, <http://www.thesoutherncross.co.za/editorials2001/editorial010718.htm>, accessed June 12, 2003.

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"We're Fine at Home": Young People, Family and Low Fertility in Spain

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The cultural iconography of Spain – bullfights, the arrogant gypsy woman Carmen, sangria, flamenco and sun – still evokes a romantic vision for an Anglo-American public. The advertising slogan, "Spain is different," initiated during the Francoist 1970s to bring tourists to Spain, still brings wry smiles to the faces of older Spaniards. For northern Europeans and Americans, "Spain," along with the rest of the Mediterranean countries, was opposed to the rational, economic, productive, Protestant and individualistic North. Since at least the time of the nineteenth-century Romantics, the "Mediterranean" has represented passionate, sensual, consuming, Catholic and relational culture.

A large, multigenerational and close family has been another stereotype of difference attributed to these cultures. The image of the large southern European family was probably due to the central role and public place children had in these societies. Northern Europeans took "the noisy presence of children on the streets, the attention they received from parents, and the active role they took in rural and urban populations as signs of unusually high fertility and big families" (Delgado Pérez and Livi-Bacci 1992: 162).

Whereas Spaniards may have rejected most of the other stereotypes that outsiders have of Spain as erroneous, the large extended family, made up of parents, grandparents, children, siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews, has been a distinguishing characteristic for all the national communities of Spain. In contrast to northern Europe, part of Spaniards' individual identities has been as a member of a large multigenerational family. Images of Sunday dinners in restaurants with large tables crowned with grandparents, surrounded by their children and in-laws, while hordes of grandchildren of all ages scurry about, are ubiquitous. Summer vacation homes filled to the brim with siblings and their children (all cousins) populate Spanish film and literature and real life. Scores of studies and surveys attest to the importance and pleasure that these families bring in Spain (Alberdi