Emanuela Scarpellini, L'Italia dei consumi: Dalla Belle Époque al nuovo millennio.
Author(s): Jonathan Morris
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/651644
Accessed: 17/10/2011 12:34

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to The Journal of Modern History.
predicated on ideas of backwardness vis-à-vis other European countries or on a teleology that looks for protofascist elements in every single text or writer of the prefascist period. It recasts the liberal period in modern Italy in terms of its “productivity” and not just in terms of its missing elements vis-à-vis some kind of mythical “norm,” showing how the crisis of the liberal subject in Italy gave rise to a host of discourses that explored in new ways the nature and complexities of the social bond. Also original and skillfully developed is the analysis of the way gender shaped texts and discourses in the Italian fin de siècle, producing not only exclusions but also a specific inclusion of the feminine that had partly to do with the overwhelming presence of Catholicism in Italian society and the way it insinuated itself even in the discourse of most secular writers. Thus The Pinocchio Effect provides new angles for revisiting a period that tends to be rather neglected in the Anglo-American scholarship.

Yet, I am not convinced that all the writers included in the author’s cast of characters were equally aware that the “liberal subject, founded on contract and consent, was no longer viable” (3) and that all these texts and discourses equally pointed to the formation of a postliberal subject, a concept that could have used more elaboration. At least this seems the case for Francesco De Sanctis, whom Stewart-Steinberg places at the beginning of her account as the bearer of the educational project of which Pinocchio is the embodiment. Moreover, several of the ideas and discourses analyzed in the book were not just Italian, as the author herself is well aware. In particular, the exchange between Italian and French intellectuals and positivist scientists was quite intense in the fin de siècle. Marginalizing this exchange seems problematic, especially in light of one of the stated goals of the book, namely, to explore the articulation between biopower, on the one hand, and ideology and the state, on the other. Which state/s and which ideology/ies? Positivism may be seen as a “form of biopolitics” (6), but it was also an ideology that went beyond the boundaries of a single state. By placing Italy in the wider transnational context, one could better understand the genealogy of what the author calls the “old Italian problem of scioltezza” (49), symbolized by the puppet without strings, and avoid some excessive generalizations about the characteristics of an allegedly Italian “national ego.” The deconstruction of texts would indeed be unfortunate if it were to lead to the construction of a totalizing interpretation of Italian culture and society.

SILVANA PATRIARCA

Fordham University


One of the brighter features of Italian historiography in the early twenty-first century has been the emergence of a group of young scholars interested in rereading the Italian experience through the lens of consumption. Collectively they have begun laying the ground for a new narrative of Italian history that moves away from privileging well-worn questions of politics and national identity toward an emphasis on the quotidian experience and material culture of “ordinary” Italians. Emanuela Scarpellini, alongside others, such as Roberta Sassatelli, Paolo Capuzzo, and Stefano Cavazza, has been at the forefront of this group, and her new book represents the first attempt to rewrite such a narrative in a systematic manner.

Scarpellini has many qualities as a historian and a writer. She deftly applies both
theoretical and historiographical approaches from the international literature to the Italian case. Her research into the contents of a late nineteenth-century pantry, or a mid-twentieth-century set of kitchen cupboards, appears exhaustive (if, at times, exhausting) as she outlines the backstory of every tin, package, or loose item we might find there. She is a beautiful writer and presents us with wonderful and unexpected vignettes—an analysis of the changing “soundscape” of an apartment in which the ticking of the pendulum clock has given way to the shrill tones of the digital quartz alarm, a miniature history of the men’s wrist watch from the First World War to the triumph of the Swatch, and imaginary depictions of generational conflict such as the last “scene” of the book in which a young man completes his purchase of a castle under the disapproving gaze of a photograph of his great-grandparents, who cannot comprehend buying a property that exists only in “Second Life.”

The book is divided into four chapters dealing with the Liberal and Fascist periods, the Economic Miracle of the 1950s and 1960s, and the affluent society of the late twentieth century. Within each of these, Scarpellini focuses on the effect of social divisions on consumption—notably class and gender divisions, the growth of public or collective consumption of goods such as education and welfare, and the private and public landscapes of consumption—principally the domestic interior and the spaces occupied by retail commerce.

Inequalities in access to consumer society in the late nineteenth century were compounded by the conduct of the state. Over 50 percent of revenue was generated through indirect taxes on basic necessities such as salt and grist, as well as duties charged on goods entering into a city, yet workers and peasants (of whom the latter were by far the larger component of Italian society) received little in the way of educational or welfare provision in return, while public money was invested in modernizing commercial spaces such as the central market in Florence and the Victor Emanuel arcade in Milan as way of celebrating the Risorgimento. These theaters of shopping, like the new department stores, did not just attract middle-class women—they incorporated them into the spectacle.

Fascism was suspicious of private consumption, promoting autarchy not just through the privileging of Italian and colonial products but the lauding of the practices of self-sufficiency and autoconsumption as part of the duties of the housewife. It compensated for the lack of access to private goods by promoting the consumption of public ones—notably the many leisure activities (sport, theater, children’s summer camps, etc.) organized by the party. In effect, the regime legitimized these forms of consumption, as much as participation in them legitimized the regime.

The explosion in private consumption came between 1956 and 1970, when real consumption expenditure per capita doubled in just fourteen years. While middle-class consumption levels matched those of northern Europe, the standard of living among the working class remained less than half that enjoyed in Germany and France, as migrants from the rural south set up shacks in the shanty towns that grew up around the northern industrial cities. It was only in the 1970s that a mass consumer society was established, with over 90 percent of households owning a television and fridge, and 65 percent having access to a car in 1975.

Cultural critics such as Pasolini were quick to notice that the consumer revolution had succeeded where politicians had failed, uniting Italy around a shared experience and set of values promoted above all by television. Although economists lamented their wasteful expenditure on entertainment, peasants responded that all television broadcasts were educational, particularly commercials that taught them not only what was available but how to ask for it. Italian television consumption per capita (i.e., hours
watched per week) remains the highest in Europe, in contrast to low levels of computer and Internet use. Scarpellini suggests this may have to do with issues around cost and computer literacy—in contrast to the rapid spread of the “cheap” and “simple” mobile phone. I wonder whether the explanation is not more prosaic, namely, the poor service provided by the state telephony company SIP and its failure to invest in telecommunications infrastructure.

As the final chapter makes clear, Italy is now firmly inserted into the affluent society that covers most of the West, sharing similar consumption practices and concerns. One critique of the book would be that this transnational dimension is underproblematized, particularly in terms of its cultural dimensions. Surely a key component of the revolution in youth consumption since the 1960s, for example, was the sense that this offered not only generational differentiation but also entry into a culture that was not nationally bounded.

One might also wonder whether in focusing on four eras of expansion of consumer society, Scarpellini has not overlooked the importance of Italy’s wartime experiences in determining attitudes and practices toward consumption among both the public and the state that endured long after the end of the conflicts themselves. Yet the most significant criticism of this book cannot be of its author, who has delivered a very stimulating synthesis of the evolution of Italy’s material culture of consumption, but of the publishers, who have chosen not to provide any illustrations of this whatsoever.

JONATHAN MORRIS

University of Hertfordshire

**Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy.** By David D. Roberts. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. Pp. vi + 370. Can$80.00 (cloth); Can$35.00 (paper).

Since the late 1980s, scholars of fascist Italy have become increasingly preoccupied with the intellectual and cultural foundations of Mussolini’s regime. Beginning with *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism* (1979), David D. Roberts was one of the first historians to engage the fascist intellectual tradition head-on, challenging the view (according to Norberto Bobbio’s famous formulation) that “where there was culture there wasn’t fascism, and where there was fascism there wasn’t culture.” With *Historicism and Fascism in Modern Italy*, Roberts offers a series of reflections on the historiographical questions with which he has wrestled over the past three decades. The book reprints several influential journal articles from recent years, as well as other works (lectures, conference papers, articles previously available in Italian only) that are available to a wider audience for the first time.

The unifying theme of the collection is the relationship—personal, intellectual, and political—between Italy’s two leading intellectuals of the early twentieth century, Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. The two philosophers had much in common. Both were southerners (Croce was Neapolitan, Gentile Sicilian); both emerged out of the idealist tradition of Hegel, Kant, Schelling, and Hegel, with a specifically Italian inflection influenced by Giambattista Vico; and, crucially for Roberts, both undertook a fundamental rethinking of idealism that led them to a “radical and thoroughgoing historicism” (41). In reaction to what they saw as the spiritual vacuity of contemporary positivism, Croce and Gentile rejected all totalizing and teleological frameworks, whether Hegelian, Marxist, or liberal. Instead, they insisted on the strict contingency of history, a “perpetual incompleteness of the world” (41) that demanded both agency.