



**Recensão a *Women's History  
at the Cutting Edge.  
An Italian Perspective,*  
de Teresa Bertilotti, ed.**

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**Teresa Bertilotti, ed.**  
***Women's History at the Cutting Edge.***  
***An Italian Perspective***  
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The book is one of the outputs of a series of international encounters of scholars in the framework of the topic “Women’s History at the Cutting Edge”, launched by Karen Offen and Chen Yan. A roundtable in Jinan, Shandong Province, in 2015, and a symposium in Rome, in 2018, have been occasions for debating several themes concerning the achievements of women’s and gender history (WGH) over the past two decades, the relationship between women’s history and historical studies, and that between gender studies and critical studies of colonialism, empire and racialisation. In 2018, a book edited by Chen Yan and Karen Offen with the same title (but without the subtitle “an Italian perspective”) was published by Routledge<sup>1</sup>. These two scholars also published the article “Women’s History at the Cutting Edge” on *Women’s History Review*<sup>2</sup>. These references are included here for purposes of bibliographical clarification, and to underline the articulation of the debate and the global interest on the issue in recent years.

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1 Chen Yan and Karen Offen, eds., *Women’s History at the Cutting Edge* (London: Routledge, 2018).

2 Chen Yan and Karen Offen, “Women’s History at the Cutting Edge: A Joint Paper in Two Voices”, *Women’s History Review* 27, n.º 1 (2018): 6-28.

As explained in the introduction, the topic – the Italian road toward the institutionalisation of women’s studies – has developed through vivid confrontations (also expressed in antithetical stances)<sup>3</sup> and scholars have long since reflected on the achievements and weaknesses of women’s history. Indeed, in 2003, Anna Rossi-Doria – to whose memory the book is dedicated – asked “What’s the status of women’s history in Italy?”, underlining the coexistence of two contradictory processes: on the one hand, the scientific acknowledgement and self-legitimation of women’s history, and, on the other, the lack of consensus on the place this field occupies within Italian academic contexts<sup>4</sup>.

The book is made up of the introduction by Teresa Bertilotti, five chapters, by Maria Pia Casalena, Simona Feci, Domenico Rizzo, Catia Papa and Elisabetta Bini, and the final remarks by Karen Offen. The perspective, as the subtitle declares, is Italian, that is, it concerns the analysis of contexts of researching and teaching WGH in Italy. Its main field is historical knowledge, since all the contributors are historians that critically reflect on the relationships between history and other fields of knowledge. Against this background, reference to the Italian Society of Women Historians (*Società Italiana delle Storiche* – SIS)<sup>5</sup> is recurrent in the essays. While scholars familiar with the Italian context know the history and activities of this Society, it is worth mentioning here that SIS was founded in 1989, and that, among other publications and activities, the journals *Agenda* (1990-1999) and *Genesis* (2003-present), and the annual summer schools (1990-present) are the most visible expressions of the Society’s attention to combining research, debate, information, historiographical elaboration and education.

The dimension of educational strategies is addressed in particular by Maria Pia Casalena, who underlines that reflections on ways

3 Among other articulated processes, Bertilotti summarizes the debate between scholars Veronica Paravadelli and Chiara Saraceno. See: Veronica Paravadelli, “Women and Gender Studies, Italian Style”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 17, n.º 1 (2010): 61-67; Chiara Saraceno, “Women and Gender Studies in Italy: Lack of Institutionalisation or a Different kind of Institutionalisation?”, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 17, n.º 3 (2010): 269-274.

4 Anna Rossi Doria, “Un nome poco importante”, in *A che punto è la storia delle donne in Italia*, ed. Anna Rossi Doria (Rome: Viella, 2003), 9-16.

5 SIS homepage: [societadellestoriche.it](http://societadellestoriche.it).

of transferring knowledge – including the need for transgenerational debate, to which the summer schools have mostly contributed – have been fundamental for SIS' aim of promoting a feminine and feminist culture. The foundation of the SIS is pivotal to the discussion since the first chapter, where Casalena discusses the steps towards the institutionalisation of women's history and gender history studies. Casalena points to the microhistory and the new type of history published by the journal *Quaderni Storici* as the turning point toward embracing a feminist standpoint. The articles published by women on *Quaderni Storici*, the foundation of other journals like *DWF – DonnaWomanFemme* and *Memoria*, the participation of different generations of women in the historical debate, all together, constitute important steps taken between the late 1970s and the end of 1980s, right before a decade characterised by a more decisive affirmation of women scholars. During the 1990s, women became specialist in many more fields of historical studies; concurrently, WGH became more visible and acknowledged.

The debate about the institutionalisation of women's history was present in the journal *Agenda* since 1992, when some universities started offering feminist courses on women's and gender history. The 1990s were also marked by the fragmentation of the Italian academy into scientific-disciplinary sectors: the separation of Greek, Roman, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary history has been a serious obstacle to SIS' aims to transform the conception of history itself. Amid the specialisation of academic degrees promoted by national reforms and the Bologna Process, the debate on institutionalisation promoted by SIS led to the decision to focus the society's attention on post-graduate courses (PhDs and Masters' – *lauree specialistiche*), therefore neglecting to influence common curricula in bachelor's degrees. This resolution, together with other problems, like the cuts to departments of humanities and school reforms (like the one implemented by former Minister Gelmini), contribute to explain the frailties of women's and gender history studies in the current Italian context.

SIS' experience is also at the core of the chapter by Simona Feci, who starts by mentioning the challenge of analysing WGH as a long-

term member of the Society. Feci discusses the achievements of WGH, namely in opening new horizons in historiography, considering the impressive production in the last few decades and the importance, in this context, of the SIS, the most committed organizer in the field, with its hybrid position towards the academy: alternative to it, but influencing it and – somehow – also influenced by it<sup>6</sup>. These achievements assume a different perspective if one bears into account that in other channels like textbooks, history festivals and television programs, traditional narrations and male domination counterbalance the vanguard of WGH. In her conclusions, Feci addresses another main issue, namely the consequences of the resistance to institutionalisation by WGH itself. While being sympathetic to some core assumptions of “resistance” by WGH – the will to analyse history, as a whole, through gender categories and to act as historians *tout court* –, Feci also notices that these assumptions resulted in a series of weaknesses, which ultimately curtailed the chances for the continuity of WHG courses inside universities.

The third chapter is the only one written by a man, Domenico Rizzo, who engaged with the question by Offen and Yan on the impact of studies of masculinity on understanding women’s lives. For Rizzo, Italian studies have not yet contributed enough to the understanding of gender relations in history, as he argues that the few Italian scholars to have addressed issues related to masculinity have, in following George L. Mosse<sup>7</sup>, made cultural stereotypes inform reality. According to Rizzo, Italian scholars<sup>8</sup> have, without really being aware of this, chosen virility as the sole basis of male power and – by reifying masculinity – have thus excluded the possibility of studying gender relations. To support his analysis, Rizzo mentions the work by Australian sociologist

6 Feci argues that WGH (and, in this perspective, the history of violence against women) has challenged the categorisation and methodologies of history. See: Simona Feci and Laura Schettini (eds.), *La violenza contro le donne nella storia. Contesti, linguaggi e politiche del diritto (secc. XV-XXI)* (Rome: Viella, 2017).

7 George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

8 Rizzo mentions Sandro Bellassai, *L’invenzione della virilità. Politica e immaginario maschile nell’Italia contemporanea* (Rome: Carocci, 2011).

Raewyn Connell<sup>9</sup> and her awareness of the limitation of the dichotomy between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, which brought her to introduce a third level of analysis, the category of “complicit masculinity”. Indeed, from Rizzo’s essay onwards, the book gains a more international perspective.

In focusing on research on colonialism and racialisation in Italy, Catia Papa explains the relationships between postcolonial studies and feminist theory of the 1970s and the 1980s, and between cultural studies and historiography. In the introduction to this chapter, the reader is made aware of two main issues: first, the contrast between the approach to gender in social sciences and women’s history, on the one hand, and in poststructuralist perspectives, on the other; and second, the lack of exchange between old and new generations of feminist scholars<sup>10</sup>. A significant part of Papa’s contribution is dedicated to the revisitation of the debate on gender studies since the 1970s, including an interpretation of the Italian echoes of international debates, with the intention of making readers aware of the existence of more than one feminist theory, irrespective of the greater visibility of the theory of sexual difference – of which the foundation of the group *Diotima* – created, among others, by philosopher Adriana Cavarero – is one of the internationally known references<sup>11</sup>. Then Papa focuses on the first studies to have “racialized” the category of gender, under the influence of the new cultural and postcolonial studies developed in the Anglophone world, and focussing on migrant women. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the notions of “whiteness” and “blackness” have emerged in Italian studies, together with the presence of colonised women, against the backdrop of a country that had elided its colonial past.

During the first decade of the millennium, the SIS also opened its perspective to the colonial context. After having recalled the impor-

9 Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

10 The author argues that postcolonial studies developed in radical discontinuity respecting women’s and gender’s history; her argumentation starts by referring the negative consideration of gender studies in Italy present, for example, in: Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, *L’Italia Postcoloniale* (Florence: Le Monnier, 2014), revised edition of *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

11 Adriana Cavarero, *Diotima, il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987).

tance of studies on literary sources and diaries, Papa argues that only at the beginning of the present decade has a new generation of feminist scholars begun to study colonialism, racism, and discrimination against migrant women, who had hitherto been excluded from the history and culture of the feminist movement. Papa traces the history of the missed encounters between the history of racism and women's history in Italy, when at the end of 1990s cultural studies analysed Italian colonial experiences. Different approaches, from cultural and postcolonial studies and, on the other side, from history, have shown their own limits, in the creation of a dualism: on the one hand, the emphasis on gendered and racist discourses, without no room for the experience of women; and, on the other, the affirmation of an autonomous female subjectivity.

The last chapter analyses how a gendered world history has been addressed in Italy. Elisabetta Bini explains that, at the beginning of the new millennium, historians involved in the promotion of a gendered world history were either Americanists (including two presidents of SIS) or representatives of a new generation. Bini recalls that, when in the mid-1990s Paola Di Cori invited scholars to deconstruct ethnocentric perspectives, historians did not engage with poststructuralist and postcolonial studies, therefore leaving it to scholars of cultural and literary studies to bring the international discussion on the intersection of gender, class, and race into the Italian academy<sup>12</sup>. Echoing scholar Ida Fazio<sup>13</sup>, Bini reflects on two issues already discussed in other essays: the strong commitment of Italian historians to empirical research, something that has in turn limited the development of theory; and the influence of a feminism of difference, which has insisted on a shared female identity.

In this scenario, since the beginning of the 2000s, historians have started a series of studies of globalisation from a gendered perspective, notably through critical debates. Theoretical reflections on the challenges for renewal shared by world history, global history and gender

12 Paola Di Cori, ed., *Altre storie. La critica femminista alla storia* (Bologna: Clueb, 1996).

13 Ida Fazio, ed., *Joan W. Scott. Genere, politica, storia* (Rome: Viella, 2013).

history emerged, as well as the invitation made in 2009 by Giulia Calvi to cooperate with post-colonial studies in the direction of a non-imperialist history, rather than constructing a gendered world history, as yet another hegemonical narrative<sup>14</sup>. Bini then explores in some depth the development, during the last two decades, of Italian scholars' commitment to studying international issues, in the context of transnational practices of militancy adopted by global feminist movements. While this final part of the essay seems to be tracing the emergence of a renewed historiography from a transnational perspective, as also attested by SIS as well, and a re-interpretation of feminist movements of the 1970s, developed for instance by Liliana Ellena and Elena Petricola<sup>15</sup>, in the conclusions Bini explains that an opposite turn has taken place in more recent years, when scholars' attention shifted back to a national dimension. Bini discusses the complex causes of this transformation, which include the lack of institutionalisation of WGH in university departments, the abandonment of academic careers by younger, marginalised scholars, funding cuts, and the obstacles to adopting a gendered perspective within the Italian conservative academia.

The general impression is that the whole volume is organic and very well constructed: these feminist scholars have been able to combine the historical reconstruction of the debate with theoretical reflections, something that – as mentioned above – has been a critical issue for WHG in Italy. Individual essays are accomplished in and of themselves, but they also dialogue with the others, stimulating possible comparisons with other contexts, towards wider outreach and social impact, including at the international level, as argued in the final remarks by Karen Offen. When, in the introduction, Teresa Bertilotti summarizes the unique path of the Italian road to institutionalisation, in comparison with the Anglo-American and French models, something important

14 Giulia Calvi, "Storiografie sperimentali, Genere e word history", *Storica* 43-45 (2009): 393-432.

15 Liliana Ellena and Elena Petricola, "Femminismi di frontiera dagli anni settanta ad oggi", *Zapruder* 13 (2007): 2-7.



emerges, as confirmed in other essays too: during the last two decades, the debate has been rich, critical and informed by a great volume of production; the quantity and quality of publications of journals, books, articles in national and international history's journals attest to how the "love for history" (Bertilotti quotes an expression by Emma Baeri<sup>16</sup>) has stimulated the discussion, in spite of the difficult conditions of precarious labour experienced by Italian women historians, something explored in depth by Laura Schettini in one of her contributions on women's and gender history studies<sup>17</sup>.

16 Emma Baeri, "Femminismo, Società Italiana delle Storiche, storia: sedimentazioni di memoria e note in margine", in *A che punto è*, 169-187.

17 Laura Schettini, "Diversamente storiche: una riflessione sulla condizione delle storiche nell'età del precariato", *Genesis 2* (2011): 179-197.

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