A Female Activist Elite in Italy (1890–1920)

Its International Network and Legacy

Edited by
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CHAPTER 1

The Political Philanthropy of the Female Elites

Elena Laurenzi and Manuela Mosca

1.1 Female Activist Elites

The book we are presenting in this introduction focuses on a number of emancipationist activists of different nationalities who lived and worked in Italy in the first decades of the 1900s. These women from the aristocracy and upper-middle class undertook economic and political initiatives that sought to transform society, especially the condition of women. The aim of the studies collected here is to bring into focus and discuss—also on a historiographical and methodological plane—a phenomenon that has barely been studied: the presence and the contribution to the history of the 1900s of women from the elite, and therefore rich and powerful, who were also activists, in other words, women who were motivated by

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the desire to influence reality, organised, connected to each other, and capable of producing visible results in politics and in the economy, despite not being in government.

Historiography has kept the presence of female elites in modern and contemporary history somewhat in the shadows.[1] J. M. Johnson (2017: 8) points out that 'the field of women's history has been reluctant to place wealthy women […] in the spotlight' and underlines the reluctance of historians to connect 'women with wealth and power'. This disregard is partly due to the general approach of social history, which has focused its attention on the complex, variegated and changing reality of disadvantaged individuals and groups, with elites being depicted as 'an undifferentiated group of people who in one way or another were responsible for the exploitation and repression of those below them' (Beckert and Rosenbaum 2010: 13). Moreover, within the prevailing social-science approach, wealth and power, when referring to gender, are seen in mainly negative terms as female discrimination and exploitation. Without denying this situation, which is still widely suffered by women, this book sets out to examine the historical presence of the specific female elites who used wealth and power to implement the transformation of reality.

The public presence of female elites took on a specific relevance at the start of the twentieth century when, thanks to feminism, access to the public spheres was opened up to women of various social strata:

> Many Italian feminist activists were middle or upper class, although they did campaign for the rights of working-class women. Some of them, particularly those connected to the socialist movement, were lower middle class, including many primary teachers, but most were very much part of the social elite. (Willson 2009: 25)

[1] The interest in female elites—initiated in the pioneering studies of Daumard (1957) and Davidoff and Hall (1987)—has been given a boost by some recent works analysing women's presence in the public sphere in terms of elites, as in the study by Giammattei and Bufacchi (2018) on women scientists and writers in Naples between 1861 and 1943, by Holmes and Tarr (2006) on the *Belle Epoque* in France, by Larsen (2007) on wealthy single British women between 1730 and 1860, by Flanagan (2002) on Chicago from 1871 to 1933, or in the essays on female publishers, entrepreneurs and cultural agents in nineteenth and twentieth century Spain: Fernández (2019), Fernández de Alarcón (2015).

In this setting, the politically active female elites were agents of change, often endowed with avant-garde visions, who knew and promoted the most innovative approaches in various fields such as technology, education, medical theories and employment. They were cultivated, open-minded, curious women who kept up with the emerging movements and directions of thought, and they were interested in the international scene; they travelled and took part in cultural and political conferences and meetings. Often, as in the case of the figures presented in the first part of the book, they were foreign, belonging to different religious denominations (Jewish or Protestant), and married to Italian noblemen, intellectuals and politicians. These were the elites that brought new ideas to Italy, especially in the field of social assistance. Thanks to them, the Anglo-Saxon and central European culture of welfare made its way into the women's movement and into the political debate in general (Fossati 2010: 216).

In addition to the limitations of social history in accounting for these presences, we also find the shortcomings of political and economic history. In these sectors, studies ignore the specific nature of the effects exerted by women from the economic and cultural elites, and are therefore unable to focus on the contribution they made in terms of economic and political development. We believe that this is due to the restraints imposed by a limited methodological range. A large part of the historiography on female activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century revolves around institutions: the research has concentrated on examining associations, newspapers and journals, political parties, and trade unions,[2] shedding light on the epoch-making phenomenon of women bursting into the political scene. However, the limited nature of this approach, unless combined with other lines of research, maintains and even strengthens the political confines set by the traditional institutional (and male) framework. It therefore marginalises and fails to grasp a whole series of actions by women on the border between formal and informal, public and private, aimed expressly at having an impact on reality and transforming their world. As a result, the female contribution to political history is grossly underestimated and also demeaned since, as have been pointed out (Smith 2007), the institutional approach treats the presence

[2] Just to mention a few that are relevant to our topic, since they deal with contexts and associations close to the figures we are examining here: Bussey and Tims (1980), Greetings (2000), Taricone (2003), Gubin et al. (2005), Frattini (2008), and Paull (2018).

of women only as a numbers gap and makes them appear insignificant in terms of substance. The biographical studies of women who—through their work—had an influence on the public sphere represent another important line of research in political historiography. In this case, too, it is important to acknowledge the weight of these contributions, which finally show women as protagonists, as opposed to the stereotype that relegates them to the position of objects. In so doing, they give visibility to the processes of forming a female political personality and at the same time provide a genealogy of powerful figures that inspire the imagination of the present (Pomata 1990). Nevertheless, this individual-centred approach is also limited by the fact that women are seen in a 'monumental' perspective as mere exceptions to the rule, or as rational gender-neutral agents. Historiography, including feminist historiography, is largely indebted to this monumental vision that identifies the historical object-phenomenon with everything that leaves a lasting mark, identified with a name. This obliterates and undermines the contribution made anonymously, or in any event without identification, by those who have, however, left a trace, with actions that are instrumental in preserving but also transforming the world (Collin 1993).

1.2 The International Network: A New Methodological Approach

This book seeks to overcome the dichotomy between purely biographical and collective/sociological or institutional approaches, exploring instead the network linking the various figures through their shared participation in a range of political and economic initiatives, and their interests, readings, meetings, social events, collaborative endeavours and more or less informal ties. The possibility of tracing these connections (both on the contemporary level and on that of the transmission between generations) is fundamental for this research, since it is in itself an effective indicator of the power of the female elites to produce projects and collective actions through which they were able to influence their economic and political context.[3] It was in fact these bonds that transformed the action of individual figures into a collective action, the great impact of which, invisible

[3] See Harvey et al. (2004).

to the theoretical thought of the time, is actually essential for a more general historical, political and economic analysis.

The approach featured in the research studies gathered in this volume also goes deeper than the research based on political networks (see Di Meco 2017), which mainly examines only formal or institutional links, based on a corpus comprising official documents (statutes, bulletins, conference records, articles, reports and chronicles) or the public writings of outstanding women authors and/or leaders. We are convinced of the historiographic importance of investigating subtle ties that were not exclusively public and not always explicit—and which are therefore hard to identify with the categories and the documentary corpus usually used in studies of the political and economic history of women—but that take on special relevance in the case of women's public undertakings (see Ferrante et al. 1998). To examine these less obvious relations, which nonetheless produced powerful paths of influence and exercise of political force on the part of female elites, the studies collected in this book make an intensive use of materials from family archives and private papers. These enable us to bring out a female fabric composed of figures who did not always enjoy direct friendship or collaboration and who often did not belong to the same organisations, but who made up a clearly recognisable set. This highlights also the existence of a *milieu* that facilitated the circulation and transmission of a political and economic inventiveness that went also beyond explicit relations and actual collaborations.

The use of private papers for the history of women is an issue that has been extensively studied and discussed in feminist historiography (Varikas 1996; Guidi 2004; Soldani 2005). Using these sources is not only an unavoidable choice due to women's scarce public presence and the lack of consideration in which such presence is held (Soldani 2005); it also has repercussions for interpretation, since it allows us to reconsider some categories and assumptions of the prevailing historiographic approach. One of these misleading assumptions, as we have already said, concerns the separation between the formal sphere—institutional or semi-institutional—and the informal or private sphere, and the tendency to identify political action with the former. In the Italian context, for instance, studies focused on the female associationism that exploded at the beginning of the century and indicated it as both a signal and a cause of an authentic 'mental revolution' because it enabled the emergence and exercise of a spirit of female initiative (Taricone 2003). Nevertheless, a clear dividing line can certainly not be drawn between the formally

constituted and recognised associations and those that Taricone calls as 'occasional networks of exchange',[4] including *salons*, workplaces and family and friendship settings. As the chapters of this book show, the spirit of initiative is expressed with great force and political drive also in the private domain, and the dividing line between the different spheres is often unstable.

1.3 The Legacy

The contrast between the type of private documentation that we have favoured in these studies, and the avenues it opens for examining the political relations between women, raises questions about the transmission of tradition and the way it takes root, a topic tackled in this book by Fina Birulés and Angela Lorena Fuster (Chapter 10). Reflecting on this crucial issue confirms the relevance of documents and elements that are seemingly devoid of political or theoretical significance, such as diaries, memories and stories about oneself. These materials often reveal the need to model one's figure and establish a style that can be a vehicle of freedom for subsequent generations, explaining the influence that one generation can have on subsequent ones, without there being a formal legacy.

The examination of the transmission of the female elite's heritage of ideas and experiences therefore brings into play an intergenerational aspect. The research presented in the second part of the book traces—starting with a case study—what the female elites were able to hand down, or, conversely, to inherit. In the specific case of Italian feminism, because of the trauma of the Great War, the radical post-war change of scene and fascism's rise to political power in the 1920s, many initiatives undertaken by women between the 1800s and the 1900s suffered an abrupt halt or suffered a rapid decline, and this resulted in much historiography writing off that experience as being over. In fact, feminist historiography records a waning of the initiatives and political presence of feminist activism as early as 1911, when the vote for women was rejected, and when political propaganda on the colonial war in Africa stifled the

[4] Unless stated otherwise, the translations of quoted texts are our own.

themes and voices of feminists. According to the historian Lucetta Scarrafia, this phase marked a break in the transmission of the legacy of early twentieth-century feminism:

> It really seems that in those years there was a breakdown in the sense of belonging to a recognised feminist tradition thus causing serious damage to the following generations, to whom the experiences that had led to profound changes in the culture and in individual and collective destinies were not handed down. (Scaraffia 1986: 5–6)

However, our study demonstrates that at times there was a transmission of ideas, values and above all of concrete experiences from some of these elites down to the following generations. It also shows that their ideas and experiences still persist today in some cases, or have re-emerged, though sometimes in very different forms since, as Collin (1993) has stated, history does not proceed by additions, but by renewals.

1.4 Political Philanthropy

The threads linking the various figures analysed in this book can be traced back to the philanthropic networks created and nurtured internationally within the emancipationist movement of the early twentieth century.

Throughout the industrialised world, traditional forms of charity gave way during the 1800s to initiatives that sought to establish and experiment with a modern model of social assistance. In the name of progress and expanding knowledge, the belief developed that it was necessary to move on from the individual dimension of charity and to establish an efficient system of collective organisation with interventions addressed to the population rather than to single cases. Traditional charity was accused of not reaching the social and systemic roots of poverty, of treating the symptom without tackling the cause, and of encouraging the beneficiaries to be dependent rather than giving them the means to become autonomous. A definitive turning point came at the turn of the twentieth century, coinciding with the accumulation of capital and the expansion of industrialisation. Urbanisation and the formation of urban suburbs marked by terrible living conditions and rampant poverty prompted the transformation of charity into social intervention.[5]

[5] See Burlingam (2004), Adam (2004), Zunz (2014), and Reich et al. (2016).

The first decade of the twentieth century saw an explosion of philanthropic activity, especially among women. This occurred in conjunction with the flourishing of women's organisations of various kinds (associations of crafts, sport, culture and politics, clubs and pressure groups), which often interacted with philanthropy. At the public level, women were generally involved in promoting social reforms and, reflecting the usual gender division, their activity focused mainly—though not exclusively—on the protection of women and children. However, it was precisely through philanthropic activity that they challenged traditional roles and broke into the political scene. As numerous studies have shown, philanthropy was the area of action that enabled women to master instruments and competences that they then transferred to use in the political sphere proper: familiarity with drafting programmes and announcements, public speaking skills, the ability to organise and coordinate actions, budgeting and book-keeping skills and so on. In this sense, philanthropy prepared the ground for the fight for rights and suffrage. It gave women the chance and the means to conduct political battles (Johnson 2017) and at the same time to try out new forms of entrepreneurial organisation (Capek and Mead 2006). It came to represent a strategic significance for feminist battles (Beillard 2009).

In the light of these considerations, some feminist historians object to the distinction between philanthropic activism as apolitical or pre-political, and an activity recognised as fully political. As the Italian case analysed in the studies collected in this book shows, many important philanthropic actions were created and developed in the incubator of political organisations. The work of feminist philanthropists was motivated by the desire to bring the female masses out of their marginal state and to equip them with an effective instrument of autonomy. Furthermore, they understood their work as a profession and specialisation, and not as an idle pastime, thus developing, through philanthropic action, a political subjectivity. It is no coincidence that an acute observer such as the feminist writer Sibilla Aleramo, writing at the turn of the century, referred to philanthropists as 'the most notable figures of female intellectuality' (Aleramo 1910/1978: 160). In this sense, Buttafuoco (1988a) spoke of 'political philanthropy' underlining the discontinuity of these initiatives from traditional charity, which kept the women involved—both in the role of the beneficiaries and of the benefactors—in a subordinate, marginal position.

In Italy, the philanthropic activity of the feminist elites we deal with was concentrated mainly—though not exclusively—in rural areas. It should be borne in mind that in this country industrialisation was delayed compared to other countries in northern Europe, and it mainly involved the regions in the north of Italy, while most of the territory and the economy had a predominantly agricultural character (Salomone 2016). The corporativist trade unions and those of socialist inspiration were active among factory workers, but country areas were largely ignored, with peasant families and farm labourers, who lived in miserable conditions, not getting the benefit from any social assistance policies. The women doubled or even tripled their working hours: besides working in the fields and at home for their family, they often did weaving or embroidery piece-work in their homes, commissioned by middle-men who then sold their products to the textile industry (Pescarolo 1997, 2019). They only received a paltry payment for this work, which was often done at night.

This was the setting of the philanthropists' activity: taking advantage of the women's skills, they organised their work and optimised their products, offering them a means not only of making money, but also of empowerment. Many aristocrats and landowners, as in the case of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti or Cora Slocomb di Brazzà, who are studied in this volume (Chapters 3 and 4), opened workshops or schools on their land; others, such as Etta de Viti de Marco (Chapters 2 and 5), travelled around Italy in search of ancient craft techniques and traditions to be recovered, encouraging workers to join together and organise themselves and promote their products internationally. One of the exemplary manifestations of this unprecedented philanthropic activity was that of the Italian Female Industries, which are extensively analysed in the essays of this volume since they directly or indirectly involved all the protagonists.

1.5 The Italian Female Industries

The Italian Female Industries (Industrie Femminili Italiane: IFI) was a cooperative company set up and run entirely by women from the labour section of the National Council of Italian Women (Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane: CNDI); it could be seen as one of the richest and most emblematic experiences of pre-WWI feminism in Italy.[6]

[6] On IFI see Rosselli (1905), Bisi Albini (1905), Melegari (1907), AA.VV. (1906), Ponti Pasolini (1922), Taricone (1996), Gori (2003), and Palomba (2009).

The foundation of the cooperative was part of the increasing prominence of women in different fields of knowledge and creation, spurred on by the women's movement. It had a precedent in an exhibition called 'Beatrice', devoted to the world of women,[7] and later in another exhibition called 'Operosità femminile' (Women's Works) held in Rome in 1902 (Amadori 1902; Soldi 2015). These exhibitions revealed the vigour of artisanal lacework, which was spreading across the whole of Italy at that time. Several schools and workshops had sprung up in various regions since the end of the nineteenth century on the initiative of highly placed women who were curators and collectors of this ancient art and at the same time committed to women's liberation, as we will see in the first part of this volume. Bringing these dispersed enterprises together in one cooperative linked to the CNDI represented a shift towards more strictly political values, since its aim was to steer the economic and social strength of these companies towards the promotion of active citizenship. Cora Slocomb di Brazzà, a woman who was gifted with a sharp entrepreneurial spirit and moved by a strong political and moral sympathy towards the weakest members of society, was elected president of the IFI (see Chapter 4). Etta de Viti de Marco set up the cooperative with Cora and had a chair on the first board of directors. She was accompanied on this by a number of women from the aristocracy and *haute bourgeoisie*, representatives of a pluralistic milieu which was open to theories of civil society development and growth: Lavinia Taverna (1924–1997), a writer noted for her publications on botany and gardening (Taverna 1982, 1997, 2011); Liliah Nathan (1868–1930), Jewish sculptress and philanthropist[8]; Bice Tittoni Antona Traversi, philanthropist and wife of the parliamentary deputy Tommaso Tittoni, foreign minister in the Italian governments from 1903 to 1910 and Giuseppina Bakałowicz-Aloisi (who died in 1940), volunteer nurse and wife of the Armenian-Polish painter Stefan Bakałowicz.

The IFI brought together some four hundred schools and workshops spread across the entire Italian peninsula. These multifarious organisations were grouped into regional committees headed by a patroness, who was responsible for supervising and promoting the workshops and individual

[7] It was organized by Angelo De Gubernatis in Florence in 1890.

[8] She was the niece of the Mazzinian patriot Sara Levi Nathan and Ernesto Nathan, mayor of Rome from 1907 to 1913.

lacemakers in her area, studying traditional patterns, reconstructing their history where possible and training the craftswomen in lacemaking techniques. Often a school was set up next to the workshop for the workers to receive a basic education in reading, writing, mathematics and elements of general culture, law and rights. The products of each workshops were sent to the head office in Rome, where they were exhibited and sold. Sales exhibitions were held in large hotels, tourist resorts and spas, and a proportion of the products was exported to America, where outlets were set up in New York, St. Louis, Baltimore, Washington and New Orleans. An exhibition centre was soon established in Rome, and in the following years the cooperative showed its products at the Universal Expositions of Rome, Milan, Paris, London, Brussels and Berlin.

The commercial fortune of the IFI was related to a large extent to the lace market, which had grown exponentially in Europe and the USA since the mid-nineteenth century. The fashion had been launched by the Arts and Crafts movement, inspired by John Ruskin and William Morris, which had a strong influence on the cultural world at the turn of the twentieth century. This movement had rediscovered lacemaking and restored its value as an art that preserved and handed on an extremely rich cultural heritage. Spurred by this historical and philosophical interest, the lacemaking sector saw rapid growth, with a huge increase in production and sales, and a reorganisation of manufacturing. At the same time, and also thanks to the showcases of the international exhibitions where prices were agreed and fixed, lacemakers came under the scrutiny of researchers and collectors (Ricci 1911; Carmignani 2005; Fontanesi 1992).

Thus, lacemaking took on a 'polyvalent character' (Carman 2014: 93) in these years. It was an interweaving of cultural, aesthetic, social and political factors, and a wide range of different figures were involved: promoters, workers, master craftswomen, researchers, purchasers, collectors, philanthropists and activists. It was one of the few manufacturing sectors in which women were not simply employed as cheap labour but were able to achieve positions of prestige as skilled workers, master craftswomen and entrepreneurs.

This dynamism goes against the common sense of our times, where lacemaking seems emblematic of gender stereotypes and the exaltation of 'the female values of patriarchal society: […] patience, domestic reclusion, refinement' (Guidi 1992: 171). In the historical and cultural context of the early twentieth century, these crafts appear instead

as the cornerstone of a comprehensive redefinition of gender relations. Entrepreneurs, master craftswomen and even workers often owed their success to having made a series of breaks with the female role. Amelia Rosselli, the Italian Jewish writer who was the first secretary of the IFI, published a series of articles at the time that revealed her clear awareness of the transformational power represented by this apparently traditional enterprise, defining the IFI as 'one of feminism's greatest successes' (Rosselli 1905: 9). This women-only enterprise, Rosselli argued, constituted a challenge to the codes and prejudices that saw women as incapable in administration, and which served to legitimate and perpetuate their dependence on and subjection to men. In the IFI, women found not only a source of income, but also the chance to show that they were 'able to organise, manage and regulate the complex financial mechanism without which even the highest ideals cannot become reality today'.

The experience of the IFI was also innovative in terms of the relationships between the women taking part, which in many cases defied barriers of age, provenance and social class. In some schools and workshops, there was an unprecedented process of communication between women of different classes on the basis of their respective capacities and experience. Amelia Rosselli (1903: 146) described the workshop as a 'neutral terrain' where relationships among women were taken out of the vertical hierarchies of charity and instead inspired by shared research and study:

> no longer expressed in the act of the hand that gives and that which receives, but by two heads bowed in unison over arabesques of old lace, together working out their secret. (Rosselli 1903: 492)

The most immediate objective of the cooperative was to tackle the serious problem of the over-exploitation of women's domestic craft production. The IFI tried, wherever possible, to turn women into their own bosses. Its statutes enabled workers to receive 65% of the proceeds, and they could become shareholders with full rights by donating the first ten liras they earned to the cooperative. The statutes also empowered the board to provide raw materials and advances on sales to particularly impoverished workers. Furthermore, needlework was seen as an outstanding example of the 'traditional industries' and as such an alternative to the 'machine industries' (Ponti Pasolini 1930). This contrast referred primarily to the higher quality of craft work over mass production, and secondly to the aesthetic sense advocated by John Ruskin, whose

works were highly fashionable in Italy and much valued in women's movement circles (Ruskin 1857; Lamberini 2006). Amelia Rosselli (1903: 483) also argued that needlework countered the alienation of production-line labour because it 'tears women away from slavery to machines, leaving them free to infuse their own work with feeling'. Finally, lacemaking provided an alternative means of independent subsistence to factory work, which for women was oppressive both in terms of class and gender. As the contemporary trade unionist Ines Oddone observed, women workers were the victims not only of the greed of industrial interests but also of men's corporate unions, which enabled them to monopolise the best-paid jobs, 'with the cruel indifference that stems […] from their traditional position of domination'. The factory, therefore, perpetuated women's 'servile status', taking them from paternal and marital dominion only to make them 'slaves to work, without being offered an adequate recompense' (Oddone 1902: 58).

1.6 Practical Feminism

The political philanthropy of the emancipationist elites corresponded to a change of strategy that was widespread in Italian feminism. After Italian Unification (1861), pioneering feminists like Anna Maria Mozzoni and Paolina Schiff had raised their voices to demand universal suffrage and the reform of the Civil Code which kept women under the control of men.[9] At the end of the nineteenth century, the Leagues for the Defence of Women's Interests were formed, pursuing the same aims (Mancina 1993). Journals like *Vita femminile* ('the mouthpiece of the women's movement in Italy') were founded, and intense lobbying was begun along with campaigns to raise awareness in public opinion and among the political class.

In the passage to the new century, however, the women's movement weighed up the challenges still open and saw that the goal of political rights not only came up against the hostility and closure of political circles, but had also made little headway with women, who seemed to be wary or fearful of joining the movement. The new generation of feminists therefore decided to work more proactively, carrying out more practical actions. Instead of calling for equality, they insisted on the value

[9] See Conti Odorisio (1980), Buttafuoco (1997, 1988b), Pieroni Bortolotti (1975), Rossi Doria (2007), and Willson (2009).

of the difference that women made; rather than aiming at assimilation and conquest of the spaces reserved for men, they appealed to the virtues and knowledge traditionally reserved for women, seeing them in a positive light, interpreting them as a value and no longer as a shortcoming or inadequacy.

> Unlike the feminism of the suffragists, early twentieth-century feminists did not emphasise the issue of equality but tended to couch their demands in the language of gender difference and equivalence. (Willson 2009: 24)

Winning their rights certainly remained a central goal, as is shown by the effort some of these activists put into the battle for the vote. However, emancipation in the broader sense was now to be achieved through a set of initiatives ranging from education to publications and to social assistance, which embodied a double strategic value: on the one hand, they would serve to attract the masses of women who were indifferent to, or wary of the suffrage battle, while on the other, they would demonstrate to the official powers and society in general that women were capable of dealing with the management and control of crucial sectors of national life such as healthcare, vocational training and the preparation for employment.

This pragmatic shift did not concern only the initiatives of political philanthropy we are examining in this book. It marked a more general tendency in the Italian feminism of that time, with an expansion of operations of social support reflecting different ideological positions and having different features.[10] Feminist historiography records the specificity of this age, labelling the feminism of the early 1900s with the term 'practical feminism' (Conti Odorisio 1980), which was already a widely used formula at that time. In an article published in 1907 in the journal *Vita femminile italiana* and explicitly titled 'Femminismo pratico e femminismo teorico' (Practical feminism and theoretical feminism), Amelia Rosselli gave a clear formulation. She identified two tendencies in feminism, not in contrast but distinct in their priorities. Theoretical

[10] The best known of these initiatives was *L'unione femminile* (The female union), founded by Ersilia Majino, of socialist inspiration (Buttafuoco 1985, 1986). Its welfare initiatives included numerous training courses (ranging from literacy to domestic science and childcare to professional development), employment agencies for domestic staff, assistance to poor mothers and the Information and Assistance Offices (Willson 2009: 31).

feminism stressed suffrage, summing up the aspirations of women in 'a single aspiration (the highest of all), the right to vote' (Rosselli 1907: 18). It therefore neglected the cultural and social condition of the masses of women, and above all the fact that the majority of women did not have economic independence, the 'first condition to participate properly in political life'. As a result, 'a group of highly intelligent women demand on behalf of women a reform of which they alone are able to understand the importance and the meaning'. Practical feminism, on the other hand, acted concretely to promote the conditions of the female masses, so that they could develop political awareness, together with material autonomy and cultural stature. Under the banner of practical feminism, Rosselli outlined a real political movement with its own profile, its goals and its own agenda, even if these did not appear as well defined and detailed as in the case of suffragism, since it was difficult to 'make propaganda of simple, modest ideas, which cannot unfurl any flag of revolt to the wind'.

On the value and political significance of the philanthropy promoted by the early twentieth century feminist elites, subsequent feminist historiography has expressed diverging opinions. The historian Franca Pieroni Bortolotti (1975) argues that converting the goals and strategies towards practical feminism was a step backwards compared to the first-generation feminists' demands for equal rights, and she denounces the bourgeois, elitist, conservative nature of the initiatives undertaken. The historians of the later generation—of the 1980s—have however reviewed this negative assessment, seeing those initiatives of political philanthropy, seemingly regressive, moderate, or even minimalist, and superficially irrelevant, in a different light. They reinterpret practical feminism as a vast movement of political and social action that sought to redefine the concept of citizenship and to construct the welfare state. However, despite this admission, most scholars have not corrected their judgement on the moderate, conservative character of that movement. Annarita Buttafuoco, for instance, who as said was the first to recognise the innovative political character of the philanthropic action of the female elites, observes at the same time that they made their own demands and slogans related to traditional gender structures, so ultimately these protagonists presented themselves as preserving the social structure, indeed, with their rationalising action, they compensated for its distortions and dysfunctions without actually questioning its foundations (Buttafuoco 1988a). This conservative label is one of the factors leading to the oblivion into which women's works of political philanthropy fell for many years, not deserving

the interest of male or female historians. Some young Italian scholars have only recently rediscovered the interest in early twentieth century feminism, also proposing a different historiographic approach: shifting the axis of analysis onto processes of subjectivation, they have studied the formation of political consciousness in the female philanthropist elites, through the study of correspondence and documents from family archives (Gori 2003). This reopening of the archives has also made it possible to recognise the newness of these women's projects and their avant-garde character, which undermined the logic of the industrial capitalist system from within, promoting, for example, corporatism as opposed to the logic of capital and profit, or creating local development opportunities as opposed to the theory of emigration as a source of development.

As Marisa Forcina's essay in this book (Chapter 8) clearly shows, the practical aspect and sense of reality in these experiences of political philanthropy appear to be closely intertwined with the ideal of a renewed society, regenerated from within. Practical feminism was a movement projected towards the future, but at the same time proud of the past and its legacy. It promoted the profile of the 'new woman' (De Giorgio 2014), without acquiescing in the myths of progress and modernity; rather it attempted to enhance the skills acquired in the sphere of female action (motherhood and care work), as meaningful and useful for the construction of the nation, and to raise traditionally female jobs to levels of excellence. Work thus became the driving force of political action aimed at affirming full female citizenship; this citizenship was no longer completely projected into the future and identified with equal voting rights and equal access to male professions, but was claimed by virtue of the existing contribution, already effective, that women made to the common good with their work. Alongside the issue of work, mention must be made of education. While in nineteenth-century feminism the interest in this issue was entirely centred on the demand for female education in order to bridge the gap with the male gender, now instead women became the promoters of a revolution in the field of education and training. Education was placed at the heart of the project for the renewal of society and became the fulcrum of many actions—circulating or rural libraries, vocational schools and popular schools, rural and infants' schools—for developing and testing the new pedagogy of freedom, in the style of Montessori or Steiner (Pironi 2010; Kramer 2017). Last but not least, the pluralist, inter-faith, international character of this movement must be

highlighted. The participants were lay women, Jewish, Catholic (mainly innovators, close to Modernism), Protestant, Orthodox, women from the north and south of the world, socialists and liberals: a world that was no longer provincial, but cosmopolitan, pluralist and cohesive at the same time (Fossati 2010). It revolved around networks of female relationships and its 'lively eclecticism' enabled diverse cultures and experiences to be drawn on and justified alliances and attempts to reconcile differences.

1.7 The Contributions

The first part of the book reconstructs the women's network that linked three paradigmatic figures of American women based in Italy who exhibit the liberal, inter-faith and international profile of an early twentieth-century political elite. It exemplifies their practical feminism, which went beyond the mere demand for rights to undertake significant experimental and entrepreneurial initiatives. At national level, the network involved the whole country, as one of the three American women acted in the South, one in the Centre, and one in the North of Italy.

In Chapter 2, the author Manuela Mosca reconstructs the life, thought and activity of Harriet Lathrop Dunham (New York 1894—Rome 1939), known in Italy as Etta de Viti de Marco. This chapter does not deal with her activism in the struggle for women's emancipation, as this issue is dealt later in the book (Chapter 5). Rather, it outlines her biography, which has never been studied before, focusing mainly on her cultural and political interests. The chapter describes her social commitment, and her patronage of artists and writers. It also reconstructs her involvement in the political battles in support of free trade and the development of the South of Italy. She fought them between the 1890s and 1920s with her husband—the economist and politician Marquis Antonio de Viti de Marco (1858–1943)—and the group of Italian liberals. In particular, Etta de Viti de Marco took care of the relations of the Italian radicals with the Anglo-Saxon liberal world. Like most of the enlightened elite of that generation, she believed in education, democracy and civil progress, topics on which she wrote articles published in prestigious journals.

In Chapter 3, Maria Luciana Buseghin examines the activism of Alice Hallgarten Franchetti (New York 1874—Leysin 1911), a Jewish American woman of German provenance, already educated to philanthropy

by her family of origin. She married Baron Leopoldo Franchetti from Tuscany. Like Antonio de Viti de Marco, he too was a politician, and they both defended the rural masses and struggled for the development of the agricultural sector of the country. In her beautiful Umbria region, in the centre of Italy, Alice founded in 1908 the Tela Umbra's cloth company which produced canvases and laces: it was intended as an instrument of emancipation for peasant women. The quality of life, the original conception of the work and of its organisation were of primary importance for her: for instance, a kindergarten was attached to the laboratory, and flexible hours were introduced. In 1909, she also started a vocational school for women, where home economics, the care of infants, elementary sociology and pedagogy were taught. The author also describes the Rural Schools founded by the Franchettis, with their innovative experimental courses.

Chapter 4 should be read as a precious testimony written in the first person, both from its author (Idanna Pucci), and from her maternal great-grandmother Cora Slocomb Savorgnan di Brazzà (New Orleans 1862—Rome 1944): the long quotes from the latter give the reader the impression of hearing her voice. This American woman, who married Count Detalmo Savorgnan di Brazzà in 1887, introduced the art of lacemaking in order to improve the conditions of peasant women in the northern Italian region of Friuli. She founded several Cooperative Lace Schools which achieved the highest level of quality and succeeded in her struggle to abolish American tariffs on foreign lace. Designer and producer of dolls and toy animals, she transformed the fortunes of a small shop that produced biscuits, turning it into a big factory that is still in operation today; she also bred a new white violet that received important awards. As we have already said, Cora was the first president of the Italian Female Industries, the extraordinary organisation that we have just described. Through her rules of life, spread out in her schools and also applied within her own family, we understand her philosophy and the ideals to which she aspired. In 1895, she launched an American campaign against capital punishment, in order to help a young woman immigrant to the USA from Southern Italy, and she succeeded. Two years later, she designed the peace flag, and actively contributed to the first international peace movement. Sadly, since 1906 Cora lived in isolation for 37 years because of a mental illness.

Taken together, the international network described in these three chapters is amazing: the three women had a lot in common, besides