

Contradiction and the role of the ‘Floating Signifier’: Identity and the ‘New Woman’ in Italian cartoons during fascism.

By Efharis Mascha¹

Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of political cartooning during Italian fascism, with specific reference to the role of women, as it is symbolised in the cartoons (i.e. the woman-mother/care-taker/fascist/worker). The latter will be revealed through a careful study of the contradictions generated by fascism and the representation of this ‘New Woman’ in political satire. The caricatures I will examine belong strictly to the Left discourse. They received high circulation figures and characterised Italy’s popular culture during the 1920’s. Whilst fascism did not provide any space for women to join the high ranks of the PNF (Partito Nazionale Fascista), the Left similarly did not provide any emancipatory discourse equal to a feminist one. Hence, at this stage women are engaged to different role-positions, which do not differentiate in party politics, but are more deeply embedded in the social spectrum of the society. In order to explain this contradiction, I will employ Ernesto Laclau’s concept of the ‘floating signifier’ for my analysis. I will begin with a presentation of discourse theory with specific reference to the ‘floating signifier’. Following that, I will present a historical background and then turn to a series of examples.

Keywords: Political cartooning, Italian politics, Feminism, Popular Culture, Discourse theory.

What does Laclau mean by ‘floating signifier’?

Ernesto Laclau in his last book, on Populism (2005), suggests that the ‘emergence of the “the people” depends on three variables: equivalential relations hegemonically represented through empty signifiers; displacement of the internal frontiers through the production of floating signifiers; and a constitutive heterogeneity which makes impossible dialectical retrievals’ (Laclau, 2005: 151). For the purpose of this article, I will simply focus on the second aspect, ‘the displacement of internal frontiers through the production of floating signifiers’, and will suggest that the ‘New Woman’ in Italian fascism constitutes a floating signifier.

In order to understand the concept of floating signifier, we need to discuss the role of heterogeneity and homogeneity, the role of displacement and the internal frontiers.

The role of heterogeneity and homogeneity is discussed in Laclau’s work following Fanon’s concept of lumpenproletariat, which constitutes itself as a pure exteriority to the existing status quo and takes place as a ‘radical political equivalence’, since the lumpen does not have any particular interest and is not organised together under an established social category. Laclau discusses this concept a step further and suggests that the lumpen are not fully external and that is due to the fact that the antagonistic frontier is not fixed and irremovable but constantly negotiated and reproduced. Therefore, he suggests that the ‘opposition A-B will never fully become A- not A. The ‘B-ness’ of the B will be ultimately not dialectizable. There is a real of the ‘people’ which resists symbolic integration’ (Laclau, 2005: 149). In a way, nothing is purely heterogeneous or purely homogeneous and nothing is purely outside or purely inside. The frontier between

interiority and exteriority is not fixed and this escape of signification is significant for the construction of identity.

If we are to understand the un-fixity of the frontier and its constant re-determination, we need to consider Gramsci's 'war of position', as it constitutes the logic of displacement of political frontiers. What does Gramsci mean by 'war of position' and why is it significant for us here? Gramsci borrows this term from military terminology meaning that the military attack does not take the form of a frontal direct attack but is a systematic re-determination of the frontier between the enemy and yourself. This means that we do not face a complete destruction of the scenery in one moment but we see the dividing line between the two camps to be constantly displaced and changing direction. Hence, the logic of displacement of frontiers. For Gramsci, fascism as a hegemonic project emerged, on the one hand, as a 'war of position' with Mussolini's power broking attitude incorporating both liberals and popolari into his first government and slowly disempowering them, whilst the fascist elements were becoming stronger. On the other hand, fascism emerged as a 'war of manoeuvre', as a militant movement spreading the power and violence of the fascist squads.

The first logic of 'war of position' is necessary in order to understand the constant move of the frontier as it is not a frontal attack but a series of moves. Now, the question remains, what is the role of floating signifier in this spectre?

For Laclau, the floating signifier is the signifier which 'results from the unfixity introduced by a plurality of discourses' (Laclau, 2000: 305). Due to this plurality, the signifiers interrupt each other and are eventually unable to unite together in a chain of equivalence, thus they are *floating*. For Laclau, this is in fact the creation of a "new people", who would require the reconstitution of the space of representation through the construction of a new frontier' (Laclau, 2005: 150). In other words, the floating signifiers seek a new space for representation and at the same time are the outcomes of two parameters:

- a.the non-fixity of the frontier and,
- b.the constant displacement of this frontier.

So, following Laclau, the floating signifier seeks a new space for representation primarily due to the non-fixity of the frontier. In other words, the space of representation of the 'New Woman' in relation to the 'Old Model' is not fixed but constantly negotiable. The 'two types' of women exist together simultaneously and fascist ideology is not producing a fixed space for either of them but includes both types even though they seem to contradict each other (i.e. the mother-child care taker with the career woman engaging in politics). This type of non-fixity of the frontier can also be understood in Gramscian terms as the role of contradictory consciousness.

'The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of this activity... One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or *one contradictory consciousness*): one which is implicit in his activity and which truly unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of reality; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically accepted' (Gramsci in Femia, 1987: 43 *my emphasis*). The concept of *contradictory consciousness* can explain the fragmentary unity of popular culture and the struggle of the latter to become a counter-hegemony discourse that would be comprehended by the subaltern groups and achieve consensus. More specifically, in

the case of Italian women, contradictory consciousness could be translated as the struggle of women's consciousness between the activities and roles of the past whilst engaging in the new demands of modernity. In other words, we should examine women not under the rubric of class consciousness, since they do not constitute a class in economic terms at least, but incorporate them in the subaltern groups which are characterised by this contradictory consciousness. Due to this contradictory consciousness these groups are easily affected by the ideological apparatus of the dominant order. Therefore, we can notice a vulnerability of the floating signifier and in fact a recognition that the gender issue is very complex and intersects to different identity formations similar to the ones the lumpen proletariat does. As Judith Butler suggests, '(i)f one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is' (Butler, 1990:3).

Secondly, the non-fixity of the frontier goes hand in hand with a constant displacement of this frontierⁱⁱ. In this sense, the essence and function of the frontier is constantly displaced to something else, hence the career woman is for example a thin woman whereas the mother-child carer is a fat, ugly one.

These two parameters are very important for the analysis of the 'New Woman' in Italian politics of 1920s. I will first discuss the overall historical background of this new identity and then look at political cartoons of the time. I will discuss how this new identity was constructed and symbolically represented.

Historical encircling of the 'New Woman'

The fascist regime attempted to create the 'New Man' and the 'New Woman' (Nuova Italiana). The post-war period was characterised by severe casualties, material and human, and the revolutionary project of fascism which was leaning partly towards liberalism and partly towards socialism, which was needed to find ways in which to escape from the war misery. Creating the New Man and Woman constituted one of these ways. The analyses of Victoria de Grazia and Robin Pickering-Iazzi are significant in putting into perspective the role of femininity and the woman during the 1920s and reveal the inherent contradictions in the fascist ideology concerning the matter. These contradictions were emphasised by the gap between the traditional Italian society of First World War and the segmentation of modernity entailed in fascism. Fascism in this respect had a dualistic vision concerning the female role. Women, as 'reproducers of the race', were 'to embody traditional values, being stoic, silent, and fervid', as patriotic citizens, 'they were to be modern, that is combative, public and on call' (De Grazia, 1992:147).

Mussolini's regime was premised on the traditional role of the woman as mother and caretaker. It demanded that women raise children and 'act as careful consumers, efficient household managers, and astute clients' (De Grazia, 1992:9). Fascism considered the gender roles from an essentialist point of view, dictated by the 'nature' of woman and not constructed by social relations. The primary role of woman was taken to be motherhood. The regime insisted on this role, as the birth rate was very disappointing after the First World War and insisted on the role of the man as family leader. In other words, the regime promoted a paternalistic model of the family based on a hierarchy giving privilege to family's male members. For Mussolini, real men would be family men, and 'he who is not a father is not a man' (De Grazia, 1992: 43). This might have been due to the domestic policy of the regime which was intended to increase the birth

rate and reflect the regime's 'sensitivity' as a family-orientated power system, but it was contradicted by the young socialist Duce who was 'emphatically a free man...sober-virile, ready to run, fight, escape, dance, and arouse a crowd' (De Grazia, 1992: 43). In January 1927, the demographic problem – which was related to the family problem – was 'part of a more general endeavour to moralise Italian civil society' (De Grazia, 1992: 42). The moral order had become equal to the public order and local authorities had the power to act upon this matter.

At the same time, due to the high levels of male unemployment after the war the fascist state 'favoured men at the expense of women in the labour market, the family structure, the political system and society at large' (De Grazia, 1992: 5). Also, in order to reserve low-wage workers in industry, a group constituted wholly by women both before and during the war, 'the regime devised an elaborate system of protections and prohibitions regulating the exploitation of female labour' (De Grazia, 1992: 5). Controlling the economy of the household, the position of the women in the labour market, the way they raise their children in order to become good soldiers, fascist advocates willing to fight for the whole Italian nation, all these were attempts by the state to intervene in the sphere of the private and make the public life its rule. Fascist ideologues considered women intellectuals as an "unnatural", masculinised, diseased, and empty figure' (Pickering-Iazzi, 1993: 7). Nevertheless, there were many women authors and great part of the female population was their readers and audience. Therefore, despite the efforts of fascist ideologues to create a closed and fixed discursive field, 'women figured in it as not only the objects, but also the subjects of discourse' (Pickering-Iazzi, 1997:27).

In De Grazia's view, Mussolini and his state tried to redefine the boundaries between the private and the public 'thereby altering the relations between state intervention and individual initiative and between collective engagements and private lives' (De Grazia, 1992: 15). This was accomplished by abolishing the parties, the free press and the public accountability of the government, and what remained of the public sphere, for Passerini, 'was driven underground' (Passerini, 1984: 184). Part of this underground public sphere constituted the anti-fascist political humour that I examine in this paper. This is the reason why, in order to understand this humour, it is important to elaborate on the states' intervention in the creation of a new role for the Italian woman, which according to De Grazia was a 'remarkable new hybrid: she served her family's every need, yet was also zealously responsive to the state's interest' (De Grazia, 1992: 77). How was she responsive to the state's interest? Why did this dualism create contradictions? And how can it be identified in relation to the male role? All these questions will be addressed in the analysis of the following caricatures. At the same time, the political caricatures are products of the Left and carry within them the ideological line of the party; however, to the fascist ideological contradictions concerning the woman's new role, Left discourse did not have a response or an alternative. Satire and irony were meant to pick upon fascist contradictions but did not mean in any way to suggest a third way to the female role. Hence, reading the political cartoons we are actually facing a clear reproduction of these contradictions.

Composition of the material

My analysis of political cartoons during 1919-1925 refers strictly to the symbolic value of the cartoons and not to their effect even though they received high circulation figures. Due to the intense fascistisation of the civil society and the promotion of the patriarchal model, I did not find any women cartoonist but all of the cartoonists were male. More specifically, the material I am using is exclusively caricatures published in satirical weekly journals as *Guerin Meschino*, *L'Asino* and *Pasquino* of 1919-1925. The journals were anti-fascist and with a strong leftist background. More specifically, *Guerin Meschino* was a satirical weekly journal published in Milan since 1882 by Francesco and Giovanni Pozza. It was suppressed in 1925. Its publication restarted in 1943 and ran until 1949ⁱⁱⁱ. *L'Asino* (=the donkey) was the first socialist satirical weekly journal published in Rome starting in 1892 by G.Podrecca and G.Galantara. From 1921, it was published in Milan under the direction of Galantara only and its circulation was 100.000 copies per week. By 1925, it was suppressed by the fascist^{iv}. *Pasquino* was also a satirical weekly journal published in Turin from 1856 by Piacentini and Cesana. In 1922, it was directed by Gec. After the Liberation, it was reprinted and ran until 1956^v. Official and unofficial censorship targeted all journals and that is why their circulation varied significantly. Official censorship was imposed on the journals gradually with the decree of 1923, which was finalised and implemented as a law on the press by the end of 1926. Unofficial censorship targeted the journals and the contributors since 1919, when fascists were still a movement and the fascist squads tended to exercise their power through acts of violence against the opposition. That is why few of the caricatures which will be analysed in this article I consider as anti-fascist, even though fascism was an ascendant power, a power to become and not yet an established hegemonic project. At this stage no signs, whatsoever, exist of a fascist satire as a counter satirical project to the leftist one. On the contrary, the fascist answer to the leftist laughter was violence.

The 'New Woman' in caricature.

He heads a mob of 100,000, lined up in a queue...

Fa la testa a centomila, messi in fila...

The government should reestablish the death penalty for the enemies of fascism...
Il governo deve ristabilire la pena di morte per i nemici del fascismo...
(Cremona Nuova)



-- Mamma, nascondimi!. Viene quel brutto uomo l.
-- Non aver paura, piccina mia papà è fascista...
- Mum, hide me!... This bad man is coming!
-Don't be afraid, my little one, my dad is fascist...

The representation of woman or femininity in the political cartoons is constructed across four different dimensions/models:

- woman-mother model.
- woman in crisis (la donna in crisi).
- feminising Mussolini and/or high rank officials (i.e. Farinacci, minister of war).
- woman as a representation of the Italian Nation.

I will discuss each one of these models as they form different aspects of the floating signifier, the 'New Woman'.

- The woman-mother was responsive to the state's interest in the following very concrete way: she had to raise her children as fascist citizens, engage herself and them in the fascist youth organisations such as the ONMI (National Agency for Maternity and

Childhood), direct her household according to the national interests, make her children - against her will- good soldiers who would in all likelihood sacrifice their lives for the good of the nation, be a good wife and back up fascist ideology. In other words, the state's expectation was 'to fascistize the family as the smallest unit of the authoritarian regime, whose motto was to 'Believe, Obey, Fight'' (Pickering-Iazzi, 1993). The mother's response in the caricature "He heads a mob of 100.000...", 'don't be afraid, my dad is a fascist', encapsulates the whole meaning of this fascistization of the Italian family.

More specifically, for Mussolini and Farinacci (Minister of War), the unity of the party would be safeguarded by the elimination of the opposition. So, Farinacci stated that 'the government should re-establish the death penalty for the enemies of fascism'. Following that, even the fear of the little girl over a big, red, ugly man will be solved due to her grandfather's conscription in the fascist party as her mum suggests to calm her down. In other words, political satire mocks the fascistisation of the Italian family, the imperative of subscribing to the party, and the intervention of political society in civil society, as Gramsci has described in the Prison Notebooks. Spera mocks the fact that the threat of violence will be erased in case you are inscribed to the fascists and your family will be safe and tranquil. In other words, he makes fun of the role model of woman mother by connecting it to the politicisation of the family, therefore degrading its role and significance for the Italian society.

Spera's caricature for Guerin Meschino uses an image portraying an aggressive monster, which verifies Freud's theory of humour as a relief mechanism of the hidden elements of aggression^{vi}. He also uses displacement in two cases in the caricature in order to successfully avoid the censor, since the caricature belongs to the high level of censorship (1925). The first one is in the heading of the caricature -'fa la testa a centomila, messi in fila'- is a displaced version of a rhyme in a poem written by G. Giusti in 1833 (the period of the Risorgimento) called *La Guillottina a vapore*^{vii} (= guillotine with steam) (Matarelli, 1982). Giusti used this rhyme in his poem 'fa la testa a centomila, messi in fila' in order to give details of the hundred thousand heads the guillotine cuts and puts in a line in three hours. Giusti at that time was making fun of the repressive regime of Francesco IV of Modena and almost a hundred years later Spera makes fun of the re-establishment of the death penalty by entitling his caricature with Giusti's rhyme. This use of displacement successfully unites a historical memory regarding repression and execution from the period of the Risorgimento to fascism, and manages to transmit to the people the message of the similarity of the practices without referring directly negatively to Farinacci's statement in Cremona Nuova (his birth place and the name of a fascist journal), thus lulling the vigilance of the censor. The cartoonist refers to Cremona Nuova instead of using Farinacci's name, as by that time he was the PNF's secretary and a member of the intransigent group of fascists; therefore, he belonged to the sphere of high censorship. After 1924, his name was hardly ever mentioned in the cartoons.

Secondly, the use of the red colour for the monster as a displacement of fascism is significant and unique in this caricature, as red according to Passerini 'tended to be the colour that swept away every tendency to moderation and compromise' (Passerini 1984: 104). It was a colour of reaction, agitation and aggression, which brings us back to the Freudian thesis of destruction as an element constitutive of laughter in order to relieve the subject from oppression. Nevertheless, in the political arena, the red belonged to the left

and the black to the fascists, and cartoonists kept that distinction firm during this period, but in the caricature the red monster is a displacement of Mussolini, who has swept away any tendency to moderation and compromise and wishes to 're-establish', following Farinacci, 'the death penalty for the enemies of fascism'. Hence, the red monster with the black face (clearer indication of fascist symbol) and the big axe, the long, red wings, holding a smoking pipe and looking aggressively at the family makes the caricature funny and successful and avoids the censor as it might, due to its redness, suggest an allegiance to the left.

Historical memory and popular culture, as we can see above, are directly linked via political humour. These historical sources and links that political cartoonists use successfully enable them to transmit political messages while avoiding the censor and at the same time to disrupt the ideological construction of fascism, which regarded Mussolini and the fascists as the direct descendants of the Roman Empire. In this way, political satire degrades the symbolic order of the master discourse and re-organises the general horizon between popular culture and the master discourse. I consider this a very clear case of organisation of counter-hegemony, which is deeply rooted in the culture of civil society and therefore constitutes a clear evidence of resistance of the ideological homogenisation of the fascist hegemony. The fascistisation of civil society was accompanied by fiscal measures, such as the celibacy tax for men between the age of 26 and 65, the prohibition of abortion and its equation with contraception. As Passerini notes, 'The Rocco Code of 1930 incorporated abortion under a new heading, personally proposed by Mussolini, of 'crimes against the health and purity of the race' (Passerini, 1987: 175). Doctors were obliged to denounce abortions and there existed a high level of police surveillance. Consequently, abortions were held in a clandestine and cruel way, causing severe repression among women who could be visualized in the numerous oral history accounts collected by Passerini. This form of fascistization of the Italian family was creating contradictions and anti-fascist sentiments among a large part of Italian women. But, at the same time, Mussolini's policy on abortion coincided with Catholicism, obtaining the support of the Church whilst creating an immense contradiction in Italian society at the time.

So, did women back up fascism? For De Grazia, '(h)onour for the *Duce* could go hand in hand with the ridicule of official prescriptions on female conduct. Sacrificing gold and silver marriage rings in the huge scrap-metal collections organized to further the Ethiopian war effort went along with the outright flouting of the regimes demographic programs' (De Grazia, 1992: 14). Sacrifices and suffering, on the one hand, and honour for the *Duce* and belief in the national interests, on the other hand, were fused together. On 14th of May in 1921, in the Journal 'Fascio' (official fascist journal), we have the first appeal of the fascist movement to the Italian women by the following phrase: 'Tell your husband to vote for the fascist candidates' (Detragiache, 1983, p.230).

Due to the tragedy of the situation, the repression of their body and the restriction on their ability to control it, we do not see caricatures that mock this huge sacrifice women made as it was a very sensitive aspect of the society. As we have stated before, there are limits that transcend political humour and occasions such as this one in drawing the distinct line between what can we make fun of and what we cannot. In order to generate a better account of the way in which this fascistization functioned and to whom it was referring, we need to examine separately the two different generations that were

brought up during fascism. Therefore, we have already discussed the girl of the 1900s, who had gone through the First World War and had suffered its casualties. That was the first (old) generation. They had experienced the post-war period and been through a period of emancipation, similarly to other Western societies during the 1920s, which coincided with the emergence of the 'new' generation. This 'new' generation will be the topic of investigation in the following section. She is the career woman and she emerged as a new female model out of a series of fiscal measures and the birth of the industrial sector, where female work was needed.

b. Woman in crisis.

For De Grazia, 'the Italian *maschietta* was the local counterpart of the American flapper, the British bachelor girl, and the Parisian *garconne*' (De Grazia, 1992: 118). This Italian *maschietta* is portrayed in the following caricature for Pasquino and is called



Afonso's opinion. Alfonso is leaning against the light post and reading his newspaper whilst a woman approaches a man on the street. She is dressed as a waitress and her moves express demand and query. She is the displacement of the '*donna in crisi*' (=the woman in crisis)^{viii}, as she is very thin and career orientated. Alfonso's words -'they want to push the woman to the public life...didn't I always think the same thing?'- mock her openness to the public life and action pointing out the change in woman's attitude from being a housewife and mother looking after her house and children to a career, emancipated woman who participates in public affairs.

In other words, her lifestyle is directly opposed to the woman portrayed in the section above, who follows the fascistization of her family and reproduces a patriarchal structure of the society. On the other hand, her economic emancipation is accompanied by her participation in public life and the fascist rallies. Her economic emancipation also meant a sexual emancipation and the right to choose her partner and not to be chosen, which is being mocked in the caricature. In the fascist rhetoric, this 'choice' was inscribed as a female masculinisation and it equally meant a lack of men's virility. Following Spackman, 'stepping out into the public sphere 'masculinizes' and 'sterilizes' women, while the loss of a position in the public sphere necessarily 'devirilizes' men' (Spackman, 1996:35). This type of gender approach was also linked to the role of human reproduction. Following Spackman, 'production and reproduction are strictly, and asymmetrically, linked for men and women: only men involved in economic production are figured as capable of sexual reproduction, whereas involvement in economic production is presumed to destroy the women's ability to reproduce' (Spackman, 1996:35). Therefore, the 'woman in crisis' was a career woman but at the same time a 'masculinised' figure unable to reproduce itself and sustain the fascist dream of creating more fascists.

In this phase, the fascist values were contradicted, but by the 1930s the fascist regime condemned emancipationism and considered the ‘old’ generation of the good housewife and mother as advocates of modernity, although it coincided more with Catholic conservatism and less with the feminist current of the other European countries. So, in other words, although the fascist ideology was attempting to inspire the norms of modernity in the Italian society, it in fact brought about traditional elements and conflicting values. Mussolini himself had conflicting views about the role of the woman as a socialist and later on as a dictator. His rurally-rooted misogyny, as De Grazia posits, ‘held that women were angels or devils, born to keep house, bear children and plant horns’ (De Grazia, 1992: 147). Or, in another instance, he stated the following: ‘I am rather pessimistic ... I believe for example, that a woman does not have a large power of synthesis, and that she is thus unfit for great spiritual creations’ (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000 p.23). Due to this ‘spiritual unfitness’, women’s participation in the fascist rallies had an administrative character and also an involvement in the propaganda of the party^{ix}. In other words, they were not able to take political decisions for the party but were able to deliver these decisions to the public and practice them as well. Following Detragiache, fascist women by 1922 were involved in everyday disputes and discussions of subaltern groups even though they were not able to actively participate in politics (Detragiache, 1983: p.233-4). Therefore, these numerous contradictions in fascist rhetoric and ideology constructed what we called before the floating signifier as two parameters were taking place simultaneously. The old model coexisted with the new one and at the same time they were in big contrast. Hence, the non-fixity of the frontier and its constant displacement between the two models supported the existence of the female role as a floating signifier. The ‘feminine woman’ and the ‘virile woman’ were co-existing as two faces of woman’s role, allowing fascist rhetoric to accept or disapprove each of them in different historical moments.

The next model I will examine is related to the feminine features that cartoonists tend to use in order to mock Mussolini and his functionaries.



MICHELINO: Se debbo dirti la verità, o Duce, mi piace di più nell'altro costume...
Michelino: If I have to tell you the truth, oh Duce, I like you more with the other dress...

c. Feminising Mussolini and/or high rank officials (i.e. Farinacci, minister of war).

A vast majority of caricatures tend to portray Mussolini or members of the cabinet either as women or as possessing feminine features (i.e. ballet or belly dancer, musician or isolated woman) in order to degrade their power and displace their misogyny with femininity. Hence, in the following caricature, Mussolini is portrayed as a peace-maker angel asking his assistant’s approval for his outfit.

The Pax is generally symbolised as a woman dressed in white clothes with a wreath around her head, in the manner of ancient Rome. The Romanesque features are constantly revived in the caricatures as they constituted a substantive

part of fascist ideology since Mussolini and the fascist project were meant to be in the paths of the Roman Empire.

In our case, the woman is displaced to a version of Mussolini, wondering how the dress suits her, with Michellino saying to him that he preferred the other one. In this case, Galantara had added the wings of an angel, distorting Mussolini's image even more. The Pax has a number of different connotations, which via displacement are implicit in the caricature. By December 1924, at the end of a tormented year, filled with violence, illegal acts and the emergence of a new coercive regime, Mussolini fulfils every role but that of a peace-maker, which makes us laugh. Peace for him means the end of opposition, the end of illegalism, the pacification of strife between the fascist groups, the full establishment of his regime. As he stated in his speech of October 1922, 'peace with those who really want peace; but with those who are a danger to us and above all to the nation, there can be peace only after victory!...' (Halperin, 1964: 106). At the same time, he signed a 'Pact of Conciliation' with Zaniboni and the Socialists as an agreement to stop the violence between the two groups (Hilton-Young, 1975:126). The agreement, however, did not have any impact on the attitude of the squads, as violence was exalted in the fascist rhetoric invested with the outfit of a national saviour.

The war/military outfit replaced the peace one and displacing Mussolini from a war fighter to a peacemaker dressed as a woman degraded his personality but also displaced the gender frontier. Mussolini as peacemaker is funny due to the feminine features and his question to Michelino portrays a sign of weakness, passivity and pity contrary to his official image of virility, manhood and militarism. So, we could argue that the displacement of femininity to weakness, passivity and pitifulness goes hand in hand with the model of woman mother and child carer and equally blurs the frontier between the latter and the model of the woman in crisis. Mussolini and his functionaries were often portrayed as 'weak' subjects with feminine features. Female roles were also attributed to the abstract notion of the 'Italian nation', which was constantly addressed in the fascist rhetoric and will be the topic of the next section.

d. Woman as a representation of the Italian Nation.

The myth of the great Italian nation descending from the Roman Empire justifying the existence of the working class was at top priority in any speech Mussolini made. For example, the following passage is an extract from Mussolini's speech that acted as a prelude to the March on Rome in 1922:

'We have created our own myth... Our myth is the nation, the greatness of the nation [...] The labouring masses do exist within the nation; they are a large part of the nation; they are necessary to the life of the nation in both peace and war' (Halperin, 1964 p.106).



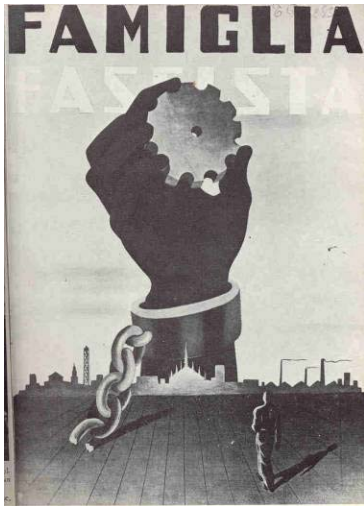
Fascism created its myth around the glorifying moments of the Italian nation and references to 'patria' or 'patriotism' were constantly made and were justifying people's engagement in fascism, the war and the currents of violence. Mussolini's love for the nation is being mocked in the following caricature. The female woman is dressed in a roman gown as the displacement of the Italian Nation, which is about to receive a present from Mussolini. In contrast to the previous models examined, in this particular case the female role is invested with superiority (taller than Mussolini), dignity (bents her head), glory (symbol of crown as a tiara) and also poverty as she is dressed in a very plain dress with nothing luxurious on her (i.e. accessories, ornaments, etc.). Hence, it is the representation of the Italian Nation, which all Italians should defend and protect and has strong ties with the roman period/empire. However, the little present that Mussolini brings to the nation stands a bit higher from the woman. The miniature of a fascist soldier is the gift that Mussolini gives to the nation. At the upper part of the caricature, there is a note saying that following article 13, all the expenses of the military would be charged at the budget of the Presidential Council. Therefore, the cartoonist mocks Mussolini's action to donate the fascist miniature to Italy and puts pantalone, the displacement of the poor Italian- the subaltern class- to offer money and the club, mocking the origin of the means of violence. Mussolini organised the fascist squads including a series of subaltern groups (i.e. unemployed, poor, workers or peasants) and pantalone seems to be identified with them, but also is the one who receives in most cases violence from the squads, when he is identified as the subaltern left poor citizen, who is not willing to subscribe to the fascist or concede to their orders.

The caricature depicts an evident hierarchy of the fascist squads before the nation and Mussolini. The female role, even though superior in relation to the previous models we discussed, contributes significantly to the notion of the floating signifier. The displacement of the abstract notion – nation - to a female role extends the frontier of the signifier even further than the one of the mother-child carer or the woman in crisis. The

female role is displaced to the ultimate signifier -the nation, which is invested with certain socio-political-historical traits of great value. In addition, the nation, at the time, was a de-politicised category and the cartoonist by using a female role for displacing the nation is actually de-politicising the female role. The Left discourse did not provide any alternative to the fascist discourse with regards to the female role in society. Hence, it is more evident that the role of the floating signifier as the frontier between Left and Right is even more blurred in this respect.

Conclusion

The regime cultivated a certain contradiction in the role of the woman. On the one hand, she was forced to stay at the margins of the traditional structure of the family but,



on the other hand, she was asked to support the fascist organisations, participate in its rallies and work in the industrial sector in order to increase the national product and support the war preparations. This contradictory view of the Italian family can be seen in the following propaganda poster^x, which symbolises the links of the fascist family with industry. Meanwhile, by creating soldiers who would be killed in the battlefield, fascistization gave rise to a tragic role for the woman-mother and strengthened the position of the career-orientated woman. The tragedy of the woman-mother was another limit for the political satire not to point at and an area of high censorship, since the human losses in the wars in Spain and Ethiopia were not announced as they were simply moments of victory.

If Fascist ideology aimed at homogenisation, fascistisation and standardisation of the Italian society establishing one role model for the New Italian Woman, then reading and analysing political caricatures of the emergence of fascism challenges this thought significantly. Therefore, it is important for the following reasons:

a. It gives insight to the existence of political satire during this very early stage of fascist ascent as most anthologies of political satire seem to either devote little space to material of this period, neglect their existence, or pinpoint the severity of censorship, which did not allow any political caricature to be printed.

b. It provides a different reading of this material based on discourse analysis. Political satirists mocked different subject positions and brought to the fore subject positions that the regime tried to hide or escape signification. Therefore, this type of popular culture requires a reading in a micro-political level understanding the symbolic signification and meanings, which the cartoonists try to convey to their audience whilst avoiding their censor.

c. People laughed with cartoons and their objects of mockery and relieved themselves from the oppression of the regime and its practices. This relief can also be interpreted as a power of the disempowered and can provide a reading of subjectivity beyond the passive consumer of fascist ideology (Passerini, 1984, De Grazia, 1992, Mascha 2008).

d. The construction of the “New Woman” is a floating signifier and not a fixed identity position and includes a series of contradictions in the fascist ideology. Therefore, female identity, unlike the efforts of fascist ideologues, can be viewed from an anti-essentialist point of view revealing more than one subject positions. This reading opens the space for discussion regarding the role of gender in Italian popular culture of 1920s, which I would characterise, following Bennett, as ‘(a) space in which contradictory values can echo, reverberate and be heard’ (Bennett, 1986:19).

e. Finally, Judith Butler as a queer theorist in *Gender Trouble* (1990) has problematised the notion of gender as radically independent of sex, and not simply the signifier ‘woman’, by saying that ‘gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one’ (Butler, 1990:2). I would say that my analysis of the linguistic signifier ‘woman’ as a floating signifier, in the political context of early fascism, is close to this radicalisation of gender.

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Notes

i Efharis Mascha is a lecturer of sociology at the University of the Aegean - Department of Sociology. She did her Masters and PhD at the University of Essex and following that she did a post-doc at the Advanced Cultural Studies Institute of Linköping University in Sweden. Her work consists of an array of articles in Greek and International journals on humour, sociology and feminist theory.

ii Laclau uses the word displacement in the Freudian sense. The essence of displacement according to Freud ‘lies in the division of the train of thought, the displacement of the physical emphasis on to a topic other than the opening one’ (Freud, 1976 p.88). Displacement is also a fundamental technique that Freud observed in the dream-work, as ‘it is responsible for the puzzling appearance of dreams, which prevents our recognising that they are a continuation of our waking life’ (Freud, 1976 p.130). In the same line of thought lies the creation of political caricatures, which uses displacement in order to indirectly mock the politician’s faults or criticise political practices that could have been censored in case of direct representation.

iii See Gianeri, E., & Rauch, A., (1976) *Cento anni di satira politica in Italia (1876-1976)*, Florence, Guaraldi.

iv See Gianeri, E., & Rauch, A., (1976) *Cento anni di satira politica in Italia (1876-1976)*, Florence, Guaraldi, and Vallini, E., & Candeloro, G., (1970) *L’Asino di Podrecca e Galantara (1892-1925)*, Milan, Feltrinelli.

v See Gianeri, E., & Rauch, A., (1976) *Cento anni di satira politica in Italia (1876-1976)*, Florence, Guaraldi

vi For Freud, humour is a relief mechanism of the accumulated aggression hidden in the unconscious. This relief takes place through the mechanism of displacement and condensation (Freud. S., 1976).

vii We provide you with the first lines of the *Guigliottina a vapore*:

Hanno fatto nella China	They made in China
Una macchina a vapore	A steam machine
Per mandar la guigliottina:	To drive the guillotine:
Questa macchina in tre ore	This machine in three hours
Fa la testa a centomila	Cuts a hundred thousand heads
Messi in fila.	Puts them in a line

viii Moravia with his literary style narrates this new type of woman in the following novel, A.Moravia, *La romana (=the roman woman)*, Milano: Bompiani, 1980.

^{ix} Following Constitutional Law by 1922, ‘the female fascist group could not reach any political decisions but could participate equally in the political actions of the Fasci, intervening in the discussions of the assembly’ (Detragiache, 1983:233). This Constitutional Law was followed by a State Law, where it was stated in (art.9,3) that ‘due to the high participation of women in the nation’s life, they should be ready to cooperate with the propaganda and the works of Fascism’ (Detragiache, 1983:242).

^x The picture is illustrated in U.Silva, *Ideologia e arte del fascismo (=ideology and art of fascism)*, Milan: Gabriele Mazotta, 1973, illustration 201.