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Memory and Meaning: Genealogy of a Fertile Protest

Elizabeth L. Krause

University of Massachusetts - Amherst, ekrause@anthro.umass.edu

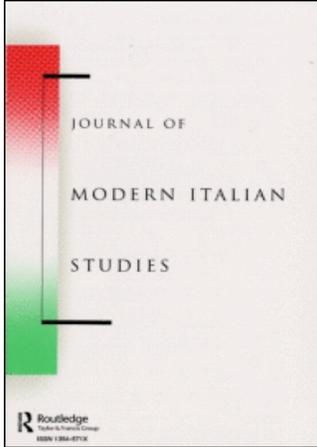
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Elizabeth L. Krause^a

^a University of Massachusetts, Amherst

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Memory and meaning: genealogy of a fertile protest

Elizabeth L. Krause

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Abstract

This essay parses ethnographic and historical research on the political economy of generational and reproductive change. It aims to grasp experiences and transformations related to Italy's 'lowest-low' fertility, a situation that demographers and policymakers view as dangerous. This paper offers a counter-narrative as it asks: 'What do subjugated memories and everyday practices reveal about Italy's demographic "decline"?' Studies of Europe's demographic transition – one of the most famous yet quiet revolutions of modern times – have largely ignored an examination of transformation through the lens of memory. Using a social-genealogical methodology to merge subjugated and erudite knowledges, I draw on local memories that may upset the 'tyranny' of globalizing discourses. Memories from central Italy reveal a history of hidden traumas and dislocations involving a complex and hidden economy of weavers and wetnurses that are all but forgotten in expert diagnoses of the nation-state's demographic status.

Keywords

Fertility, memory, reproduction, wetnurses, demographic transition, trauma, genealogy.

This essay parses ethnographic and historical research on the political economy of generational and reproductive change in Italian society. It offers a report of on-the-ground experiences and transformations related to Italy's 'lowest-low' fertility, a situation that a number of scientists, policymakers and casual observers have come to view as dangerous and in need of intervention.

A majority of Europeans hold the opinion that, related to demographic trends, something is amiss in their societies. A survey published in 2005 found that 75 per cent of Europeans consider low fertility a negative development. In Italy, 82 per cent of respondents view the declining rate of births as 'somewhat negative' or 'very negative'.¹ In some important ways, the results contradict the findings of ethnographic research.

Taking inspiration from anthropologists who consider themselves 'historians of the present', as Rayna Rapp (1999) described, or who focus on 'the remembered present', as Tony Galt (1991) phrased his interest in how people bring the past into the here and now, I asked the following: 'What do

subjugated memories and everyday practices reveal about Italy's demographic "decline"? Ethnographic research yielded narratives that countered the one on danger. These narratives suggested a past in which members of the older generation recalled suffering related to taking in, giving away, or otherwise losing children. Many came to embrace small families as a way to attain a better life, to reject rigid hierarchies, and ultimately to become modern.

Studies of Europe's demographic transition – one of the most famous yet quiet revolutions of modern times (Alter 1992) – have largely ignored the lens of memory.² This research draws on local memories and upsets the current 'tyranny' of global discourses about declining fertility. Dire predictions have become master narratives. As such, they lay claim to truth; they fortify national desires for social and national 'coherence' (Krause and Marchesi 2007; Krause 2005). Memories related to fertility decline reveal a history of hidden traumas and dislocations that are all but forgotten. These traumas and dislocations involved birthing that was commodified in a triangular trade among an underclass of women and children. In the Province of Florence of the early twentieth century, these subjects of history were interconnected in their roles as wetnurses, weavers and foundlings.

Italian historian Denis Mack Smith's assessment that 'the great majority of Italians lived by agriculture' in the 1860s and 1870s is misleading (1959: 43–6). In Italy's economy of the nineteenth century, agricultural activities were intimately intertwined with industrial ones. In fact, the countryside was where most industrial activity was to be found. Furthermore, not only were women, as well as children, conspicuous in industrial work, but they predominated. The first national Italian census in 1861 counted some 123 women for every 100 men working in industry – noting a sex ratio of 1,000 men to 998 women (Ortaggi Cammarosano 1991: 156–57).

People in the Commune of Carmignano followed this trend of agricultural – industrial integration whether living in a township nestled in its rugged hills or one in its river-bottom plains or in an isolated farmhouse somewhere in between. This commune, some 20 kilometers northwest of Florence and, since 1992, part of the youthful Province of Prato, was a place where *trecciaioli* (straw weavers) outnumbered *agricoltori mezzadri* (sharecroppers) more than two to one at the turn of the last century (see Panerai 1993/94: 48). Straw weaving figured centrally in the regional economy and linked people to global markets. According to historian Alessandra Pescarolo (1991: 28), the activities of the *trecciaioli* represented the principal sector of industrialization in the countryside of nineteenth-century Tuscany. Lamenting the difficulty of counting the precise number of women workers in Prato, the author of a report in 1896 noted that 'in this commune nearly all of the women and some of the men weave braids for hats' (Pescarolo 1988: 89). The activity was extremely common in Carmignano. In poring over the census of 1901 for Poggio A Caiano, then part of the Commune of Carmignano, I noted at least one *trecciaiola* in every household when this bustling township was 2,784 strong.³

The genealogical method

My methodology made use of what I dub a social–genealogical approach for accessing memory, dislocation, and adjustment. The project, based in the industrialized environs of Prato in Tuscany, involved collecting narratives about family and economic change. A trade in straw hats connected towns northwest of Florence, extending from Signa to Prato. I aimed to understand the nuanced stakes involved in remembering relations of production and reproduction in this area, where women have a long though invisible and devalued history as participants in the global economy (see Patriarca 1998; Pescarolo and Ravenni 1991). How does this history as agents in the international straw hat trade shape memories of family-making?

While conducting research in spring 2004 in the Commune of Carmignano,⁴ I turned to recent advances in eliciting memory that make use of historic photographs (de Miguel 2001). Photos serve as an artifact of and tool for constructing social reality. In this case, the images were particularly relevant. They included photos of weaver women and peasant men in the very territory of Carmignano. Paul Scheuermeier, an ethnologist, took them between 1930–35 on behalf of the University of Bern as part of project to produce a linguistic and ethnographic Atlas on Italy and Switzerland (Miraglia 1981). I had come across the prints some years before in the Archivio Fotografico Toscana in Prato. The archive had also reproduced about a dozen of the images in its journal *AFT* in an article by Giovanni Contini, a visual and oral historian native to Carmignano. The weavers, he noted, communicated ‘a sensation of subalternity and poverty’ (Contini 1993).

Photographs may be worth a thousand words, but words may be worth more than a thousand photographs. The photos proved to be particularly powerful in terms of eliciting memories and reawakening consciousness related to the structures of a bygone era when the cultural roots of the demographic transition were taking hold. The memories of the interviewees shed light on birth–labor connections, and archival data corroborated these links, which likely have ongoing repercussions for today’s demographic dynamic.

Through acts of recording, documenting and analyzing, the researcher does not simply ‘give voice’ to a particular version of the truth, but may serve as a co-creator of a new narrative, a new version of history and hence of ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway 1988). In a 1976 lecture, French philosopher Michel Foucault described his genealogical method as one that merged subjugated with erudite forms of knowledge. Emancipatory potential resided in bringing into dialogue authorized and disqualified forms of knowledge. The aim of critical inquiry was to counter ‘totalizing discourses’ (Foucault 1980: 78–81), which I take to mean strategies that claim to speak the whole truth. One such strategy arises in the metaphors of pathology that populate the scientific and media portrayals of Italy’s birthing trend: references to the low fertility as a ‘profound malaise’ (Golini *et al.* 2000) or to the humans whose reproductive behavior

might change it if only they did not suffer from a ‘syndrome of lateness’ (Livi-Bacci 2001: 147). A commonplace international representation of the population trend as dire similarly appears in the June 2006 issue of *Science*, which describes Europe’s current demographic moment as a ‘baby deficit’ (Balter 2006).

Other stories – subjugated ones – lay beneath the dominant tropes of experts and their aggregate numbers. A genealogical method of excavation can prevent wholesale erasure of memory. Getting at this kind of knowledge, and making sense of it, however, is no simple endeavor. Subjugated knowledges may seem naïve, quaint, chaotic or otherwise insufficient to the task. As Foucault (1978) foretold, the method would entail ‘a painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memory of their conflicts’ (1980: 83).

Foucault was not much for ethnography, but this prized anthropological method of participation and observation in its sundry forms surely qualifies as a ‘painstaking’ method for accessing struggles that the common stories about reproductive trends elide. The remembering of such conflicts may appear as rude because they do not traffic in politeness or conform very well to the order of the day (see Gramsci 1971). The following ethnographic data, then, attempt to collaborate with those whose ‘rude’ memories perhaps have much more to say than their content might initially suggest.

Rude memories

One ‘rude’ memory forced its way into the discursive space of an ethnographic interview during my fieldwork in 1996. I sat across the table from Emilia Raugei in her small, dark kitchen. Her humble house sat two doors down from the restored farmhouse that I was renting and where she was born in 1920. From age 6 she worked as a straw weaver in a diffuse network of workers connected to the international hat trade. Emilia was one of seven siblings; she had only one child. She emerged as a central protagonist of the quiet revolution whose story I sought to understand. I had barely formulated my question about how she and her husband came to have an only child when Emilia launched into a tale of a communist uncle-by-marriage who, fearing fascist repercussions, stowed away in a crate of hats on a ship bound for Argentina, and in the process abandoned three children, and one of them for good. The otherwise fluid narrative became especially dysfluent (after Bakhtin 1984; Hill 1995) when she discussed repercussions on the family of the hat-dealer-cum fugitive:

E i su – lo zio di lei, il fratello della su’ mamma, gli disse,
And her – her uncle, her mother’s brother, he told her,
 ‘Lasciami la – una bambina’, gli disse, ‘almeno-’
‘Leave me the – a girl’, he told her, ‘at least-’
 e gli lasciò questa Germena
and she left him this Germena

che la sarebbe moglie del su' fratello, la mi cognata.
who would be his brother's wife, my sister-in-law.

I set out on a genealogical research trail, seeking others who might interpret Emilia's truncated tale of a child who was given up and whose fate of being abandoned settled deep into the town's collective memory. She grew up to become a go-between in the international hat trade and was widely known for her irascible character, which people attributed to her family history. Emilia's narrative and the photographs provoked memories. (My attempt to press the issue with Emilia on a subsequent visit was thwarted due to the aging process: her efforts to cope with the present rendered thinking about the past irrelevant.) When I approached Natalina, a neighbor who had worked in straw weaving in the 1920s and later, she knew well the abandonment story. During an interview with Natalina and her daughter-in-law, Rita, the pair offered me their interpretation – with another story about the way that kinship, reproduction and loss were intimately interwoven into the economy:

Betsy: But I always ask myself, why, when Emilia mentioned that they left the girl, why did she say 'at least -'?

Rita: So, they went to America, but even people here they'd give babies to wetnurses. My mother, who was a twin, her grandma gave her to a wetnurse. Her mother kept one and my mamma, she was sent away to a wetnurse, an aunt, until she was 14 years old.

Natalina: My mother also took one in.

[tape #04-24, 4/21/04]

I was perplexed that they would respond to my question about Emilia's dangling 'at least' with an answer about the historic practice of giving infants to wetnurses. I listened as Natalina went on to recount her mother Enza's ordeal with taking in a child from a foundling home.

Enza was born in 1889 and had her first child, Teresa, when she was 20, in 1909. As she was preparing to wean the girl, she learned of the possibility to take in a baby from the Hospital of the Innocents in Florence. Money was short, the farm wasn't rendering, and she knew that she still had milk, a valuable substance in those days. The hospital administrators needed wetnurses. They offered a stipend for nursing a newly abandoned infant for a year. Some extra cash could mean the difference between surviving or starving. With some trepidation, Enza agreed. As long as she had milk, she could expect a monthly stipend up to a year.

Time passed and the 12 months neared an end. Nobody came for the baby. From time to time, the *carabinieri*, police, would come round and check the baby's condition. They would make sure Enza still wanted him in her care. A monthly bank note continued to arrive. The boy's mother must have been sending the money, Natalina reasoned, even though Enza had never had any contact with his parents.

Teresa and the baby boy grew closer. The boy was like a brother to her. They were *fratelli di latte*, milk siblings. Enza came to love the boy like her own son. In 1912, when he was 2, she gave birth to a son who died at birth. In 1914, she gave birth to a girl, who died at 28 months. Childhood illnesses were life and death matters back then, and many little ones ended up in cemetery plots reserved for the ‘angels’. It was a rough time for losses. One day, when the boy Enza had nursed from infancy was almost 6, the police arrived to take him away.

My mamma, poor thing, she used to say, but by then he was old – poor woman – ‘old’ so to speak. But this baby, him, for my mamma and daddy – he knew them as his daddy and mamma. He had been with them, taken in from when he was little, y’know. And she’d say how he was, how the baby suffered and so did my parents because they say it was a really awful parting. So she used to go, she’d say, ‘No, no even if I starve to death’, she’d go, ‘of these things I’m not doing them any more.’

Enza gave birth to Natalina the following year, in 1917. In 1921, a son came along but died after 15 days. A baby girl, Milena, was born in 1922. And then she bore three sons, Enzo, in 1924, Marino, in 1924, and Natalino, in 1929. All told, Natalina counted her mother as having given birth nine times and included herself as one of seven children who survived long enough to be considered part of the family. Plus there was the milk brother. ‘She had him, she thought for a year’, emphasized Natalina of her mother. ‘But then she ended up having him for five or six years.’

The photographs prompted relevant memories about how people endured poverty and loss during another interview with Piero and Amadea, a couple in their 60s. In a portrait of a large family published in the journal *AFT*, Piero pointed to his grandfather and an aunt, but he could not identify everyone. The photo had been taken at the beach, and the individuals wore their Sunday best. Some, though, were barefoot.

Betsy: But because they didn’t have shoes or because . . . ?

Piero: *C’era anche la miseria*, there was poverty. It’s not that . . .

Amadea: They had to save their shoes, oh! They had to save them for winter, so they’d go barefoot.

Betsy: Oh, I see, of course.

Amadea: It’s not like now, *si garbano delle scarpe, si comprano*, you like some shoes, you buy them!

Comparison continued of the material conditions before and after the economic boom of the 1960s. Piero noted that his father’s family was large: ‘*gl’eran tanti, tanti, tanti.*’ He counted off the uncles, and then added them up, getting corrected by his wife, who included the women in her count.

Amadea: Gli eran dieci, They were ten.

Betsy: But how many children?

Amadea: Povere donne, poor women.

...

Piero: Then, to earn a little something, they would take, my aunt to earn a little, to make ends meet, with so many children, gliene pigliava uno a balia. She would take in one as a wetnurse.

Betsy: Ah.

Piero: She gave them milk. But she didn't just take one, she took a number of them, n'avea presi diversi, diversi, diversi.

Amadea added that her grandmother had taken in an orphan to nurse. Piero repeated, 'There was poverty back then'. Amadea offered her analysis of the repercussions:

Amadea: I'd say they had more than trauma because when there's poverty

Betsy: More than trauma, in fact.

Amadea: You might say people had to let things be – Sara' anche lasciare un po' fare.

Wetnurses and weavers

All across Europe, as observed by family and social historian David Runsel, the foundling system shifted 'the money flows between city and village in the direction of the countryside' (cited Kertzer 1999: 598). Ledgers in the Historic Archive of Carmignano, formerly in the Province of Florence, confirm the observation that birthing at the turn of the twentieth century was not just about birthing. Birthing was also about the negotiation of labor and capital accumulation. The ledgers, however, complicate the picture. Giving birth affected possibilities for the accumulation of capital not only in terms of arms for peasant farm families, but in terms of a potential 'wet' resource for struggling households whose peasant-weaver members contributed directly to a network of international trade.

Historically, there were three major types of wetnurses in Western Europe: those who worked for the rich, those who worked for foundling institutes, and those who worked for the poor. The most widely documented are the wetnurses who worked for wealthy women and those who worked for institutes (see Dadà 1999; Kertzer 1993). Perry Wilson (2002: 19–20) comments on wetnurses who worked for the wealthy: 'Peasant women, particularly from Tuscany and Friuli, moved to the houses of the rich to breastfeed and care for a baby. This latter form of temporary migration could be very traumatic, uprooting women from their families and their own children, but it offered excellent wages.' Wetnurses who worked for other poor women

fell into two major types. First, there were village wetnurses who tended the children of emigrating wetnurses who had left home to work for elite women elsewhere. Second, there were the least-known type of wetnurses, those who worked for women certified as lacking milk. Eligible for state subsidies, they could thus hire a wetnurse.

Wetnurse registries called *Registro Generale dei Baliafici e Sussidi di Latte*,⁵ recorded subsidies paid to poor mothers certified as lacking milk. Striking about the registries is the occupation of the recipients of the subsidies. Some 390 women, or 96.3 per cent, were listed as *trecciaiole*, or straw weavers, among the 405 cases that the Charity Board in Carmignano reviewed from 1883 to 1902.⁶ Only fifteen cases, or 3.7 per cent, had no occupation listed, and four of those were without a mother, likely due to death during childbirth. The overwhelming presence of weavers in these ledgers suggests two possible explanations. One is that these women were among the poorest strata of society, and due to meager living conditions, malnourishment prevented their bodies from producing milk. The files contained numerous notes scrawled by the hands of doctors who certified that women were *'tutta priva di latte'*, completely without milk. The records did not indicate how the physicians determined this lactation lack.

Was it merely insufficient milk that led these working women to seek subsidies from the state so they could send their children to wetnurses? An alternative interpretation is that the women did not have the time to nurse their infants. It is unlikely that so many women would be biologically unable to lactate. In Prato of 1886, the Casa Pia dei Ceppi recorded 316 cases of milk subsidies paid to mothers defined as *'impotenti ad allattare la propria prole – impotent to nurse their own offspring'* or 22.5 per cent of the 1,404 annual births.⁷ Contemporary studies suggest that milk volume appears unrelated to nutritional status except in extreme cases of malnourishment. Insufficient milk syndrome results far more from cultural practices related to breastfeeding than biological predisposition or nutritional status. The frequency as well as length of lactation, the degree of close contact between mother and infant including co-sleeping, and the degree of support the new mother enjoys, all figure into producing levels of milk that satisfy the infant's demand (see Small 1998).

A plausible scenario is that the weavers felt pressed to continue working and motivated to take advantage of state charity. In 1893, a report on Women's Work in the commune noted that female labor was 'limited to the fabrication of straw plaits for hats', detailing that the women often worked 14–16 hour days, earning income that was significant to the household economy. The author concluded of women: 'They are viewed as not very useful by the men'.⁸ Despite this astute insight into the gender relations of the day, the report did not make note of the underground economy linking weavers and wetnurses. Likely, these women's time spent weaving was so critical to the family economy that they could not afford to lose work by tending to an infant. Hence, they applied for the state subsidies and sent their newborn to a wetnurse

even though the practice clearly was against the moral order of the day and could put both infant and wetnurse at risk for contracting syphilis (see Kertzer 1999).

Conclusion

Memories together with archival records testify to an embodied aspect of the history of global capitalism and demographic shift. The weaver–wetenurse connection complicates the conventional split between production and reproduction, i.e., between those who work for pay and those who tend to nurture. It demonstrates how birthing-work transformed into paid labor itself. Women in central Italy brought capital and cash into the household through several types of work, including agricultural labor, weaving and wetnursing. To be a paid wetnurse, a woman had to first give birth to her own child as a way to stimulate milk production. The woman's milk could then be 'sold'. It became a commodity.

We cannot arrive at an exact measure of the costs from the trade in milk and foundlings, but low fertility rates may be a fairly precise gauge. Memories and archival data reveal a situation in which a burgeoning global economy in Tuscany depended on a hidden economy of weavers and wetnurses. The memories expose a good deal of trauma that derived from this traffic in human substances, which took its toll on human emotions.

The practice is remembered, but the rude political economy has been forgotten. Re-presenting the forgotten memories about the wetnurse–weaver connection opens spaces for popular recollections that disrupt tyrannical tropes, e.g., that low fertility is an uncontested 'problem'. If women's contributions to the household entailed such painful choices and exploitative arrangements, it is no surprise they have been forgotten for they required sacrificing bonds of affection that have come to be seen as 'natural'. The history of fertility decline (see Schneider and Schneider 1996) is deeply entwined with transnational economies founded on subjects who were sandwiched between capitalist, kin-ordered and tribute modes of production (see Wolf 1982) that exacted costs on certain individuals. Inquiries into the history of family change provoke memories that unveil a resonance of trauma.

Notes

- 1 Federal Institute for Population Research and Robert Bosch Foundation (Eds), *The Demographic Future of Europe – Facts, Figures, Policies – Results of the Population Policy Acceptance Study (PPAS)*, Stuttgart, 2005, p. 6. This report summarizes the results of an international comparative research project studying the attitudes of the population to demographic change and population-relevant policies. The report analyzes what respondents in fourteen European countries think about family, children, partnership, equity and ageing. The report can be downloaded at: http://www.bib-demographie.de/ppa/PPAS_brochure_en.pdf. Accessed May 14, 2007.

- 2 Influential works on social memory include Alonso (1988), Passerini (1987), and Popular Memory Group (1982).
- 3 ASC, Censimento Generale della Popolazione del Regno D'Italia, Provincia di Firenze, Comune di Carmignano, Frazione Poggio A Caiano, Elenco delle Famiglie e persone censite il 10 Febbraio 1901.
- 4 Four months of research, from February to May 2004, served as a follow-up to my 22 months of dissertation research, funded by a US Fulbright Grant and Renewal. I lived in the communes of Poggio A Caiano and Carmignano in the Province of Prato from October 1995 to August 1997 and returned for shorter visits in 1999, 2002, and 2006.
- 5 My thanks to Silvano Gelli for bringing these ledgers to my attention in the Archivio Storico di Carmignano (ASC).
- 6 ASC, Congregazione di Carità del Comune di Carmignano, Protocollo delle deliberazioni, Fascicolo I 1, Scaffale F.
- 7 Archivio Postunitario del Comune di Prato, Fascicolo 14 (106), Miscellanea, Opere Pie, 1887–88, Casa Pia dei Ceppi di Prato, Risposte, 16 Marzo 1887. A total of 5,490 lira were paid with a minimum monthly subsidy of 2.52 lira and a maximum of 6.50 lira. This amount represented about 18 per cent of the sum paid out that year for charitable causes but only 10 per cent of the recipients. Total births are from Bandettini (1966: 118).
- 8 ASC, Categoria III, No. 93; Fascicolo No. 13, Filza 2, Agosto 30 1893.

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