

Conclusions

Throughout this book, I have explored the cultural, social and political connections that marked approaches to family life in postwar Italy and Poland. I have argued that family life and its regulation can provide us with a powerful means of looking at postwar Europe outside the Cold War binary logic, which for a long time has seen East and West as two opposed and incomparable realities.

Three elements have been particularly relevant to the comparison pursued in the book.

The first is the influence exercised by Catholicism and the Catholic Church. Both in Italy and in Poland, popular devotion and the ubiquity of Marian worship supported an enduring model of maternity as devoutness and sacrifice, and a representation of womanhood concentrated on the domestic, which informed broader understanding of family life.¹

To this should be added the influence exercised by the Catholic Church at an institutional and political level. Both in Italy and in Poland, the Concordats signed in the twenties had assigned to the Church a privileged position, particularly with regard to education, marriage, and family life, as well as in terms of property and taxation. The question of how to deal with the privileges recognised to the Church by discredited regimes emerged in both countries in the aftermath of the Second World War. Different political dynamics and power relation ensured different outcomes.

The second element concerns the impact of the war on the two countries' institutional arrangements. Both in Italy and Poland, the end of the war coincided with the creation of new political institu-

1 Blom, *Gendered Nations*; Banti, *Sublime Madre Nostra*.

tions, which, albeit different in nature and purpose, shared the aim of establishing a radical break with the past. Both in Italy and in Poland, the new republics born in the aftermath of the war anchored their political identity to the vague but politically powerful notion of anti-fascism, and promised a reshaping of the relationship between State and citizens, which had far-reaching implication for family life and its regulation.

The third and final element regards the impact of the Cold War on two deeply polarised societies. For a long time, studies of eastern Europe have looked at State socialism as a political and ideological monolith, with little space given to the study of social and cultural differences. Far more than in the case of western Europe, ideology, politics, and class dominated the analysis of the Eastern side of the continent. The analysis of Poland and Italy, however, shows that comparable issues emerged in two countries both deeply affected by the Cold War, and yet characterised by elements that deviated from both American and Soviet blueprint. While it remains essential to consider the consequence of political, social and economic transformations taking place under direct Soviet control, Poland's historical traditions and cultural values put significant limitations to the transformation of the country. Few of those 'historical traditions' had the same impact as the role of the Catholic Church.

In Italy, by contrast, the strong control of Italian politics exercised by the United States could do little to reduce the popular appeal and significant social role of the Italian Communist Party. If postwar reconstruction in Italy was under the banner of 'americanisation', the Communist tradition that has put its first roots in the Resistance proved a tenacious and rich source of political and cultural identification.

The enduring influence exercised in the two countries by the Catholic and Communist cultures respectively and the dynamics of conflict and accommodation that this forced coexistence originated in the aftermath of the war has represented one of the main axes of the book.

It was a confrontation that took place in both countries in the face of the far-reaching social changes produced by industrial transformations. Issues such as how to reform agriculture and land tenure, how to govern internal migrations, urbanisation and a rapidly expanding industrial workforce tested both Polish and Italian political parties, as well as the Church. In both countries, family and gender relations were central to those processes and to the effort to govern them.

Throughout the book, I have looked at family life as a major terrain of competition between the authority of the State and the authority of the Church.

Both in Italy and in Poland, the deep influence exercised by Catholicism and the actual political and social role played by catholic institutions in the aftermath of the Second World War limited the transformation of family life. In both countries, the battle engaged by the

Church with the secular State (and in the Polish case with the atheist State) had significant reverberations both in the domestic and in the public sphere. Historically a major provider of social services, with a near-monopoly over family matters, the Church fought hard to retain this role in the altered circumstances of the postwar years. As new states sought to redefine their duties and prerogatives in family life, the competition with the church became all the more crucial.

In Poland, the new Communist state presented itself as the enlightened protector of mothers and children, as part of broader project of national and political transformation. In the modernising rhetoric of the Polish Socialist state, promoting family welfare should go hand in hand with the overcoming of the traditional family structures and family cultures of the past. Particular emphasis was put by the Socialist state on the promise of liberating women and children from the oppression of the backward patriarchal order, also through their emancipation from religious institutions. Far from seeing in the State an ally and a provider of welfare, however, many Poles saw the family as the last line of protection against its new pervasive powers. Reacting against the expanding role and (arbitrary) powers of the State, the Church found in the family a place of resistance.

In Italy too, the passage to democracy required some redefinition of the position occupied by the family, in this case first of all in relation to the inheritance left by the fascist regime. The centrality that the reference to the family had in the fascist politics and propaganda rendered the family a particularly tricky topic for the Republican state.

Already in the Constitutional assembly, the issue of how to regulate marriage showed how politically sensitive and divisive the regulation of family life could be. In contrast to Poland, however, the Italian state did not embrace a project of radical transformation, but rather a moderate and cautious intervention, in significant continuity with the past. Most crucially, the State refrained from challenging the authority and claims made by the Church.

The issue of what kind of power could be exercised by the Catholic Church is one of the central themes of this book, and the analysis put forward is in many ways an exploration of the mechanisms through which the Catholic Church managed to retain a strong authority over family matters in the complex context of the postwar years.

Most analyses of the Catholic Church in postwar Poland have concentrated on its role as centre of political opposition. The depiction of the Church as an institution deprived of formal power and yet able to concentrate legitimate authority is a powerful and appealing narrative. However, it fails to capture much of the complexities, tensions and contradictions that characterised the relationship between State and Church in Communist Poland. There is little doubt that communist authorities tried to subordinate the Church to the State, limiting the extent of its activities and trying to control them; it is also fairly clear

that while succeeding in limiting the autonomy and formal presence of the Church, the State largely failed to undermine the Church's legitimacy and its social relevance.

Both State and Church won and lost battles over the years; both of them fought to gain or to retain an hegemonic presence in the country; both of them recurred to agreements and mediations, when political circumstances required it. The combination of conflict and negotiation shaped the relationship between the two and contributed most to transform the nature of both actors over time.

If conflict and negotiation characterised the relationship between State and Church in Poland, accommodation prevailed in postwar Italy. The political predominance exercised by the Christian Democratic party, organically linked to the Catholic Church, secured the protection of Catholic interests and the upholding of the Church's positions. Even this process was of course not without mediation, starting with the cautious acceptance by the Church of the new democratic institutional setting.

Mediation between conflicting cultures and ideologies did not take place only at a political and institutional level. The daily life of both Poles and Italians was marked by the ideological confrontation of the Cold War, including in the context of family relations.

Ordinary people's accounts testify to the importance of reaching forms of accommodation at family level, between different faiths and alternative political values. In both countries, mediations were necessary in daily life as in national politics. If many Poles found in Catholicism an avenue for political resistance, for many others, Catholicism and communism coexisted in daily practices and family life. While many Italian Catholics saw the presence of a communist in the family as an unacceptable contravention of political and religious values, in many other cases, the two faiths coexisted without insurmountable tensions.

The family remained at the core of both Italian and Polish postwar societies. In Poland, far-reaching processes of economic, legal and social transformation failed to undermine the investment in the family as an institution and in marriage as its foundation. Although economic change affected in Poland far more than in Italy both gender roles and intragenerational relations, family life remained remarkably stable. Low divorce rates and negligible levels of births outside marriage showed the enduring influence of an understanding of family life that found in catholic teaching its first source of authority. The Communist' project of legal, economic and social modernisation found a significant obstacle in the enduring social influence of the Catholic Church.

Although deprived of political representation and confronted by a hostile political environment, the Polish Church continued to make its voice heard on matters of family life and education. What Poles did in their homes, even more than in the street, testified to the Church's enduring influence. In Italy, the social influence of the Church found

perfect correspondence in a political system ready to adopt its principles as the pillars of the State.

In both countries, Catholics had to confront questions of strategy as well as of vision in the reshaping of their relationship with the State. In both cases, they successfully used their influence on family life as a means of asserting a broader social presence and public authority.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, gender relations represented one of the main fields in which alternative visions of family life, economy, and social relations clashed and found accommodation.

Without denying or ignoring local specificities, the Italian-Polish comparison encourages to rethink gender dynamics in relation to both Communism and the Catholic Church. Neither the impact of communism nor that of Catholicism, in fact, can be fully understood within the narrow borders of the nation-state. Although both Communist parties and Catholic hierarchies adopted national strategies and pursued agendas specific to the countries in which they operated, both ultimately answered to a much broader set of interests and engaged with each other in a battle that could be correctly defined as universal at least in ambition.

Both in Italy and in Poland, the pervasiveness of popular Catholicism and the Marian cult shaped an understanding of the family as an institution characterised by rigidly defined gender roles, maternal devotion and womanly sacrifice. It was a deeply set model, which both Italian and Polish communists had to confront. In postwar Poland, the radical project of economic and social transformation envisioned by Stalinist politics informed family life and gender roles. The transfer of authority over marriage from the Church to the State, the tumultuous process of industrialisation and the recruiting of women to jobs considered typically male, together with the rapid urbanisation of the country, transformed families and the social structures in which they lived. Yet, as Małgorzata Fidelis has observed, no social structure can be changed by “sheer coerce and repression”. Even in Stalinist Poland an inevitable negotiation had to take place between State and society, between “a new political order and existing national and local conditions”.² Gender relations and family roles were at the core of the complicated transactions and tentative accommodations that accompanied the restructuring of Polish economy and society. No uniform social response to the transformations engineered from above can be identified. Social and economic changes both opened and closed individual chances, and as such they were both embraced and resisted. For women especially, postwar transformations created novel opportunities as well as new burdens. Their new role as industrial workers and their greater access to education opened up possibilities for social

² Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialisation*, 5.

mobility that had been precluded to earlier generations. At the same time, established gender norms and the insufficient help provided by the State to working women meant that the unpaid work on which even the new socialist society rested continued to weigh almost exclusively on women's shoulders. Much more and earlier than in the West, the combination of productive and reproductive duties structured the experience of postwar Polish women. The notion of the 'double burden', often presented as a specific trait of the process of social engineering undertaken in Eastern Europe, captures that experience.

Here too, however, an East-West comparison encourages us to question some assumed notions of uniqueness and socialist specificity. While sociologists and historians of Eastern Europe have often seen the 'double burden' as a specific feature of state socialism, in the late seventies the Italian feminist sociologist Laura Balbo described the *doppia presenza* (double presence) as a characteristic feature of capitalism, and more specifically of a capitalist transformation in which the (late) inclusion of women in the labour market had not been accompanied by a transformation of expected social roles, particularly within the family. Both defective social policies and an entrenched patriarchal culture ensured the continuation of women's double role and double burden, leaving to them the responsibility of seeking a difficult mediation between production and reproduction.³

Although operating in deeply different economic and political systems, both Polish and Italian women experienced forms of inclusion and exclusion from the labour and domestic sphere that were shaped not only by immediate relations of power, but by deeply-set traditions and cultural norms.

3 Laura Balbo, *Stato di famiglia*.