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## **Motherhood and work in Italy**

A socio-cultural perspective

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### **The Special Issue**

This Special Issue on *Mothering and Work in Italy in the Twenty-first Century: Culture and Society\** originated in the second workshop of the *Motherhood in Post-1968 European Literature Network*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and organized by the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women's Writing (Institute of Modern Languages Research, University of London). The workshop, entitled 'Mothering and Work: Employment Trends and Rights' and held on 26 October 2012, explored, starting from literary texts, the interface of social, economic and political forces that have affected women's access to the labour market and experience of motherhood in Europe. Regrettably, it has not been possible to keep the cross-cultural, European focus of the original workshop. The Special Issue deals solely with the Italian case. In narrowing down the scope of the Issue, we have nevertheless kept faith with the ideas that animated the Network: first of all, the belief that only by adopting an interdisciplinary approach can we truly advance our understanding of the situation of mothers in today's societies, initiate change in current attitudes to motherhood, and work towards improving policies and provisions which will facilitate mothering; secondly, the vital role of literature, within this interdisciplinary approach, in the attainment of these goals. Literature can accomplish two things: first, it has the power to bring real-life situations to the attention of a wide public who would otherwise either have no experience of them or feel unmotivated to engage with them; secondly, in being able to delve deeply into

these situations, it may afford insights and, on occasion, offer solutions which the institutions, politicians and policy makers are not able to envisage.

In line with this brief of the Network, the articles in this Special Issue take their cue from a short story by Carmen Covito, 'Tempo parziale' (2007, 2009) ['Part Time'], appearing here for the first time in English translation alongside the Italian original, to unpack the key issues influencing attitudes towards motherhood and paid employment in contemporary Italy, including the role of austerity in shaping women's work and reproductive choices. The four pieces collected here crisscross beautifully with one another, interweaving fiction, oral history, testimony, cultural analysis and sociological enquiry. The short story, commissioned for a workers' rights campaign and based on a real-life testimony, is followed by two articles, a literary critique and a sociological analysis. 'Carmen Covito's "Tempo parziale": Mothering and work in Italy in a nutshell' by Monica Jansen examines the story's effectiveness in promoting awareness in the readers and its potential to bring about change. The article 'Working women in transition to motherhood in Italy' by Sonia Bertolini, Rosy Musumeci, Manuela Naldini and Paola Maria Torriani is a sociological study of twenty-one mothers-to-be (and their husbands or male partners) from Turin whose profile resembles closely that of the protagonist of Covito's short story. Together, the testimony-turned-fiction and the articles yield a detailed picture of contemporary Italy's contradictions *vis-à-vis* mothering and work. The present article will provide some historical coordinates to try to explain these contradictions. The picture is complex, as it involves many variables, perspectives, approaches and actors across a period of huge political, social, economic and cultural transformation.<sup>1</sup> I will only be able to pursue some paths and I will confine myself to those that are most relevant to mothering and work today.

### **Italian motherhood and work**

The icon of the Madonna and child has dominated the Italian imaginary since at least the Counter Reformation and the Council of Trent (1545–1563) (Accati 1995, 1998), directing the construction of the Italian ideology of motherhood. During the course of 150 years, from the Risorgimento to Unification (1815–1860),<sup>2</sup> to Fascism and the 1950s and 1960s, an on-going public discourse, secular as well as religious, progressively made motherhood the essence of Italian womanhood. The ensuing maternal/feminine archetype, which incorporates features of the Great Mediterranean Mother (Bernhard 1969; Parenti 1990; D'Amelia 2005: 20–30), is a generous, forgiving, suffering, self-sacrificial, primitive and possessive being, who is resilient and submissive at the same time, who wields authority and power within the family but is powerless in the public sphere. Yet, Italian mothers have been entrusted, at critical moments in the troubled history of the nation, with the task of instilling the highest patriotic, religious, moral and civic principles in its future citizens (D'Amelia 1997; Accati 1998; Boneschi 1998).

It is striking that in a country which places so much importance on the maternal figure, so much so that we talk about an Italian 'cult of the mother', Italian institutions across the political spectrum have traditionally been slow to recognize the needs of mothers and reluctant to invest resources in social policies aimed at facilitating their task and safeguarding their own and their children's health and well-being. In pre- and post-Unification Italy, 'islands' of modernity existed against a background of a predominantly rural economy organized around community ties, a system which enabled women to work and mother at the same time; it should be mentioned, however, that children were cared for only minimally at the time (Bravo 1997: 155–59). After Unification, the agricultural crisis took many families and women to the cities, where they could not necessarily avail themselves of the support of the extended family. A high number of women were employed in industry in appalling working (and living) conditions. Italy had a high infant mortality rate while a large number of

children were abandoned by unmarried mothers without regular jobs who were often the victims of sexual abuse. At the same time, the pseudo-scientific discourse on deviant behaviour demonized women's work, which was seen as damaging to the race (Bravo 1997: 157). With the development of industry in Northern Italy between the end of the nineteenth century and World War I, a 'proletarian aristocracy' emerged whose members could aspire to a new bourgeois model of motherhood which celebrated its joys and asserted the importance of total and unconditional maternal devotion to the child. The wives would normally leave the factory with the arrival of the first child (they might take in washing, sewing and ironing), while the husbands became the main breadwinners and took pride in being able to keep the women at home (Bravo 1997: 166–70). The Church, and later Fascism, reinforced the reproductive and mothering function of women.

In an attempt to counter the modernizing trends in the new nation, which were seen as a threat to traditional family values, the Church defended an idealized image of women as housekeepers and mothers, presenting women's extradomestic work and activities as incompatible with their mission as mothers.<sup>3</sup> Encyclicals, papal speeches and religious publications from the 1880s to the 1950s remained oblivious to the fact that among agricultural workers and the industrial proletariat women's work was not a choice but a necessity and disregarded the fact that, from the end of the nineteenth century, bourgeois women, the women with the capability of living by the Church's motherhood ideal, had started to express their unease with their subordinate position inside and outside the family (Koch 1997: 241–42). In the second post-war period and during the 1950s, the Church joined forces with the new Italian republic led by the Christian Democratic Party to make the family the site of the moral reconstruction of the nation, encouraging women to be wives and mothers and in fact finding fertile ground among women of different social classes, who were eager to return to the normality of family life after the turmoil of the war (Chianese 1980:

106). Lay and religious institutions continued to oppose women's extradomestic work and to propose maternal presence as indispensable for the child's well-being, an idea that had already been propounded in childcare manuals of the 1930s (Koch 1997: 248–51). The bourgeois myth of the mother as the centre and pillar of the family and society became consolidated in the 1950s and 1960s, aided by new psychological and child development theories that attributed to mothers a natural and instinctive ability to care for their children and be good mothers. Maternal care now was to include the affective and relational sphere and extended well beyond infancy and childhood (Saraceno 1997: 321). All this, together with the need to abide by new hygienic norms and food regimes, turned childcare into a highly specialized function which, it was believed, only mothers could fulfil: the pressure on women was enormous (Saraceno 1997: 321–23). This has made mothers morally accountable for their children's health and well-being, more recently making parents also responsible for optimizing their life chances (Faircloth and Murray 2015: 1118).

As earlier, there was a discrepancy between myth and real life. Representations that dissented from or challenged the myth could be found in a variety of cultural productions. The description/prescription of 'what' a woman should be as propounded by official discourses, bolstered by the period's domestic manuals in which 'women are [...] reduced to the essential *whatness* of motherhood' (West 2006: 26), contradicted the widespread reality of single mothers, illegitimate children, separated or unmarried couples as well as the more complex fictional and filmic representations of women deviating from or struggling with imposed social roles (Caldwell 1995; Caldwell 2006; West 2006).<sup>4</sup> Even the Church-supported educational plays written by women, staged by women-only groups for women-only audiences during the 1950s, which focused on such themes as love, marriage and motherhood and aimed to teach traditional family values and female virtues, represented married life in disenchanting, critical and even dramatic ways (Cavallaro 2006: 98–103). Unpublished letters

sent by women of the lower classes to the advice columns of women's magazines during the same years expose 'the dramatic, disturbing desolate reality of the lives of Italian women which lies behind the forced mystification of submissive, calm, satisfied fiancées, brides and mothers shut by hypocrisy in a role that even then was beginning to be unsustainable' (Aspesi 1973, quoted in Morris 2006: 120). Similarly, recent studies show that in the three decades that followed World War II, women's organizations, women activists and politicians put the issue of female employment at the centre of their battles, shaping the Italian welfare system in the area of women's access to work, reconciliation of work and family responsibilities,<sup>5</sup> children and maternity rights (Schievenin 2014, 2016). Nevertheless, the Catholic Church's influence continued and continues to be strong in Italy, making itself heard in various ways, including through the national institutional structures which it has helped to shape. Monica Jansen, in this Special Issue, quotes a comparative study of Italy and Spain which highlights the failure, in the past forty years, of Italian feminism and social democracy to affect social policies which have been 'shaped by right wing parties with the decisive support of the Catholic Church' (Tobío 2015: 14). The persistence of the Church's influence, which appears to be more pervasive in Italy than in other Catholic countries, can be explained by the presence and strength of the Church's institutions on Italian territory prior to Italian Unification and the history of its relations with the Italian state (Caldwell 1991: 7, 10).<sup>6</sup>

With the new wave of industrialization and the subsequent economic boom in the 1960s, as during the earlier period of industrialization, more men from the lower classes earned enough to support their families without the women having to go out to work. A non-working wife, among other things, constituted evidence of the transition to a higher social status, as encapsulated in the phrases 'le faccio fare la signora' or 'mio marito mi fa fare la signora' ['I let my wife stay at home like a lady'; 'my husband is able to keep me at home like a lady']. The consequent embracing of the 'intensive mothering model' (Hays 1996) was,

therefore, not only the result of the cultural shifts I have just mentioned, but also of an ambition for upward mobility and of a real opportunity for the women of these classes to 'emancipate themselves' and have a better life. Given the shortage of services and absence of men's participation in household work, these mothers, who were subjected to the 'double burden' of family and (hard) work, welcomed the possibility of staying at home. We have to wait for the late 1960s for women of the lower classes to have access to better educational and consequently better work opportunities: for them work was a tool of emancipation. School and university reforms gave less privileged groups access to secondary and tertiary education, which caused an 'explosive growth' in student populations during the decade 1965–1975 (Levy 2006: 133). This led to the formation of a new class of highly educated women who entered the labour market in greater numbers from the 1970s onwards, and especially during the 1990s.

The difficulties of combining work and motherhood have been a dominant concern of women in post-1968 Western societies. In Italy, women have had to fight against a psychological, religious, social and political order which has made it difficult for them to reconcile two legitimate desires, the desire for autonomy and economic independence and the desire for motherhood. The message from the different camps of this male order had been consistently that the one excluded the other. From the late 1800s to the 1970s and beyond, under the influence of first- and second-wave feminism, women have staunchly opposed this from different ideological and political standpoints, directing their efforts towards, among other things, having motherhood recognized as socially valuable and female/maternal competences as important social resources and towards countering the devaluation of women's work and the notion of the 'naturalness' of mothering (Scattigno 1997). Yet, even when, following the workers' movement of the late 1960s and the feminist battles of the 1970s, new legislation was passed which recognized women's rights and self-determination,



the message was clear: women could study, work, enter the professions from which they had been formerly excluded, on condition that their commitment to children and family remained total and that the latter did not suffer. The fact that Italian maternity leave provisions, introduced in 1971 (Law 1204) and still in force today in more or less the same form, were among the most generous in Europe in terms of length of period of leave and replacement salary without loss of job security, may be seen to reflect this ideology: women had to be put into a position of remaining at home as long as possible to fulfil their maternal role, a role that it is believed can best be fulfilled by them. The 1971 law came in the wake of other laws which were informed by the same belief in women's primary role as mothers but did not recognize women's right to extradomestic work.

The fascist regime had introduced a super-protective maternity law in 1934 in recognition of the fact that economic need and a high female population meant that women had to work outside the home, while continuing to restrict women's access to many employment sectors and even to bar them from some (Caldwell 1991: 107–10). The 1934 maternity law was in line with the attention the regime accorded motherhood and, as such, it was not really concerned with women except as reproducers and carers of children who would become the future population of the nation; similarly, the regime's concern with the production of healthy children was only part of its demographic programme (Caldwell 1991: 109–10). A growing population was meant to justify Italian demands for colonies as well as to provide the military manpower necessary to fulfil its imperialist aspirations (De Grazia 1992: 42). More importantly for the purpose of our discussion, the law ended up discouraging employers from hiring women (Caldwell 1991: 111). The 1950 maternity legislation (Law 860), which replaced the 1934 law, was already among the most advanced protective legislation on women workers in Europe. Yet, it was not effective as it was not supported by other policies to counteract its negative implications: in addition to not covering home and

family-based workers, which meant it excluded a large sector of female employment, the law was costly for the employers who started to dismiss women as soon as they got married (Caldwell 1991: 113–14). This draws attention to a problem that still affects Italy today – the lack of protective legislation in other areas, to support and make viable the maternity leave provisions, especially in an area which is a main concern in this Special Issue: the reconciliation of work and family beyond the period of maternity leave, no matter how long. Law 1204 of 1971 established equality of treatment for women working in sectors that had previously been excluded (Caldwell 1991: 115–16). More guarantees were added in two main areas: the mothers' health and job security (Ballestrero 1984). It was followed in 1973 by Law 1044 on the establishment of nurseries by the Regions, something that we shall see did not happen in every region or not at adequate levels. Further provisions have been introduced recently, most notably paternity leave and parental leave.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see in the article by Bertolini, Musumeci, Naldini and Torrioni in this Special Issue, paternity and parental leaves have limitations and have not yet been accepted 'culturally' by fathers and by most employers. The recent changes in labour legislation, which will be discussed below, have meant that women working part time or on temporary contracts have limited entitlements to maternity leave.

Considering the lack of serious state incentives and efforts to increase male participation in household and parental activities, the appeal and worth of Italian maternity leave provisions for women cannot be underestimated. Women who could afford to do so, normally in dual-earning families, took up all the opportunities afforded by the law, extending the leave for as long as possible; they still do, as Covito's short story and the sample of mothers-to-be from Turin show (cf. Bohlen 1996). In the 1970s, when teaching posts were still available, especially in the North (Levy 2006: 139–40), teaching became a preferred female profession, one of its attractions being that short school opening hours and long

summer vacations enabled women to look after the family with only minor adjustments and minimum disruption to the family routine. In areas such as the still largely agricultural South, where the availability of state-funded childcare facilities was low and the extended family still thrived, grandparents and other family members would help with childcare. Public childcare provision is still inadequate in Italy, with the Southern regions almost completely lacking in them (Pacelli, Pasqua and Villosio 2013: 409, 414; Istat 2014). The extended family continues to help with childcare, not only in Southern Italy and despite regional differences in family practices and norms (Modena and Sabatini 2012: 89; Arpino, Pronzato and Tavares 2014: 372, 386-88). Public expenditure on welfare policies aimed at facilitating harmonization of mothering and work is still limited, preventing women from fully exploiting their skills and fulfilling their occupational potential (Miller 2004: 203).

The legalization of contraception in 1971 and of abortion in 1978 also meant that couples could choose when to have children and how many. Women graduates postponed motherhood, in order to pursue their studies and career, till it was often too late to conceive. Others rejected motherhood. The difficulty of many women seeing motherhood as anything other than total dedication to their children's needs explains the 'radical measure' taken by some of them not to become mothers at all and the choice of others to limit the number of children and/or their career aspirations. In brief, if women were not having children, it was not out of 'selfishness' (as traditionalists would say), but out of a strong sense of responsibility. And if they were having them late, it was because they believed that to be a good mother a woman had to first become secure and confident in her own self, in addition to being able to offer children economic stability and a clean and pleasant family environment (Saraceno 1997: 328).<sup>8</sup> This situation, which was aggravated by Italian men's traditional resistance to contribute to housekeeping and parenting, caused Italy to have the lowest total fertility rates (TFR) in Europe and one of the lowest in the world in the 1990s, reaching its

all-time low of 1.19% in 1995. The TFR has risen since, but the 2014 figure of 1.37% (Istat 2015) is still considerably below the replacement threshold (approximately 2.1 children per woman) that would guarantee the generational turnover.

The conditions of female employment in Italy have changed drastically with the new millennium. Recent changes to the original Labour Law 300 of 1970, in the wake of the move to a post-Fordist economy and the recent credit crunch, have led to the erosion of many workers' rights, which have made motherhood a luxury that many couples cannot afford (Modena and Sabatini 2012).<sup>9</sup> The deregulation of part-time work, following Decree 61 of 2000, means that women's employment is often unprotected and non-permanent (Pacelli, Pasqua and Villosio 2013: 414, 428), which explains some interesting trends. It is not full-time employment that deters women from having children, but their unstable work status or unemployment, both of which leave them with little protection or completely unprotected in case of pregnancy (Modena and Sabatini 2012: 82, 86). As a result, Italy has a low fertility rate because of women's lower participation in the labour market but a higher fertility rate among the better educated and highly skilled professional women in permanent, full-time employment (Pacelli, Pasqua and Villosio 2013). This inverse relationship between work participation and fertility rates is not unique to Italy: the U.S., Britain, Sweden and Denmark, for example, where high percentages of women are in employment, have higher fertility rates than Italy, Spain and Greece, where women's participation in the workforce is lower (Miller 2004: 201; Pacelli, Pasqua and Villosio 2013: 409). In Italy, however, the issue is compounded by other determinants which are specific to its national context. Anxo et al. report that Italian married women tend to be either in full-time employment or not in work at all (2011: 163), a consequence not only of the difficulties of obtaining part-time work and of the little protection granted by part-time and/or non-permanent contracts, but possibly also of other factors: in Italy it is still rare to conceive a child outside a steady relationship (Modena

and Sabatini 2012: 78–79), the number of marriages is still high, and couples tend to marry and start a family only when they can guarantee economic stability and a nice living environment for the child (in some cases they wait until they can buy a house).<sup>10</sup> Couples also wait for the woman to find employment before having a child: this is not only about the family being able to draw on better resources, but also about fulfilling her professional aspirations after investing time and resources in education (Miller 2004: 201–2).

Gender roles continue to remain largely unchanged in Italy, a consequence of cultural and structural factors pertaining to the family organization, style of mothering and labour markets that are specifically Italian. Sociological and anthropological studies suggest that, in response to their position of subordination, Italian women have become agents of domination of their children, contributing to socializing daughters to accept gender norms and sons to become excessively devoted to and dependent on them (Accati 1995, 1998; Bravo 1997). Italian children traditionally live with their parents until they get married. They currently leave the parental home much later than their European counterparts, because of ‘high unemployment, low entry salaries, lack of state support and barriers to entering the housing market’ (Anxo et al. 2011: 163). As a result, male children benefit from their mothers’ and sisters’ domestic labour, with the consequence that they tend not to be trained in household activities: this, in turn, acts as a deterrent to their moving out (Saraceno 2000: 124).<sup>11</sup>

Inadequate public childcare services, unequal distribution of housework and childcare between the couple and limited family-friendly policies are institutional determinants, originating in, and, in turn, circularly reinforcing, cultural attitudes. As the comparativist approach teaches, ‘ideals of motherhood are influenced by national institutional structures and social policy arrangements that legitimize certain family forms and make certain child care arrangements more or less viable’ (Charles and Cech 2010: 148). This means that national institutions and social policies affect people’s ideals and choices, and they can do this in two

ways: they may shape their ideals and simultaneously (and ironically) prevent them from fulfilling those ideals.

Contemporary Italy is characterized by many contradictions and ambiguities *vis-à-vis* gender roles and family policies. Italian women have access to the best educational opportunities and to the professions, yet Italy has lower rates of female employment than other European countries. Care of home and family is still central to women's lives in most countries as a consequence of the distribution of unpaid work within the family remaining unequal despite the considerable changes in patterns of paid work: this results 'in time shortages for women and diminishes their opportunities to develop all their capacities' (Addis et al. 2011: 18; see also Modena and Sabatini 2012: 88–89). Italy presents worse statistics than other countries. More Italian women leave work following marriage and the birth of the first child than their counterparts in France, Sweden and the U.S. (Anxo et al. 2011: 173; see also Pacelli, Pasqua and Villosio 2013). High standards of cleanliness, food preparation and appearance mean that Italian women, even when they are employed and avail themselves of domestic help, spend more hours on household chores than women in the same countries, while most men participate in domestic activities only after retirement (Anxo et al. 2011: 178–80). Family policies continue to be an area in which Italy spends much less than other European Union countries. It is still assumed that care of the home and family is women's rather than a parental responsibility and a family matter rather than a public concern (Falcinelli and Magaraggia 2013: 290–91). The short story and the two articles that we present in this Special Issue engage critically with these aspects, illustrating the contemporary cultural, social, psychological, legislative, industrial and policy contexts which highly educated Italian professional mothers-to-be must tackle.

### **The short story**

In 'Tempo parziale', Carmen Covito engages with the 'facts' of the Italian employment situation of women who are mothers, at the same time demonstrating the practical and psychological pressures they are subjected to. The short story, a fictionalized real-life testimony, was commissioned for a campaign for workers' rights. That Covito did her research in preparation for the story clearly shines through in the references to work legislation, maternity leave policies, relevant officers and state departments, which have been interwoven into the protagonist's ironic, breezy, yet poignant account of her employment journey in relation to becoming a mother. Moreover, the narrator-protagonist displays great clarity and self-confidence when she outlines her personal and work aspirations at the beginning of the short story, demonstrating that she is well aware that to progress in the contemporary world she has to play the game of the labour market. An Economics graduate with a Master's in Management, she is an informed and focused individual who has planned her private and work life as carefully as she creates business plans for her clients. In brief, she is well prepared to 'manage' her life and to navigate the contemporary economic and social environment, until she falls pregnant unexpectedly.

While translating the story into English, I became aware of its polyphonic quality. The agile style and ironic mood of the first-person narration, which succeeds in harnessing the low and high tones of despondency and optimism, embeds, in free indirect speech, phrases and vocabulary drawn from the languages of management, which is the protagonist's occupational expertise, and of employment legislation, workers' rights, maternity entitlements and equality policies, with which she has to acquaint herself in order to understand how best to defend herself from her employer's attack. Other citations enrich the short story, such as the one from *Superman*, in this case to underscore the magical quality of the solution offered by the Equality Adviser, a fairy-turned-Supergirl, in the absence, as Jansen notes in her article, of a trade-union figure:

‘E a questo punto, zacchete! sbadabam! ta-dah! Che cos’è, che cos’è?! È un uccello! È un aereo! No, è la Consigliera di Parità!’ ‘Sì! Sì! Quanto mi piace, quanto mi piace! Eccola che arriva con il suo mantello rosso svolazzante e un sacco di carte e di libri e ti viene a salvare!’ (Covito 2009: 40)

[‘And at this point, bam! shazam! ta-da! What’s that, what’s that?! Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it’s the Equality Adviser!’ ‘Yes! Yes! I like her a lot! I like her so much! Here she comes to rescue you in her swirling red cloak and with loads of papers and books!’]

The result is a highly pleasing yet measured narrative, comic yet conveying the depth and tragedy of the protagonist’s private and work predicament: her being torn between loyalty to the company and the needs of her twins, between her desire to work and the pressure to give it up.

### **The articles**

The article by Monica Jansen, ‘Carmen Covito’s “Tempo parziale”: Mothering and work in Italy in a nutshell’, looks in detail at the ideological, cultural, legislative and policy contexts that underpin the short story, focusing especially on the changes in employment practices brought about by the introduction of Law 30 in 2003, also known as the Biagi Reform after the name of its promoter. Purportedly devised to create a more mobile and more flexible labour market, the reform resulted in an increasing casualization of work in a country otherwise regulated by a labour legislation strongly in favour of the employee,<sup>12</sup> and whose citizens, carriers of a collective memory of widespread poverty, high unemployment and



emigration, place great value on permanent, full-time employment and traditionally aspire to remain in the same job throughout their lives.<sup>13</sup> The statistics on which Jansen draws, relative to the years around 2007 when the story was written and distributed as a free pamphlet, show that the changes that ensued from the Biagi Reform affected women much more adversely than men. Jansen also examines, originally and productively, the ideological implications of the operation of fictionalizing testimonies in general and, in particular, Covito's successful deployment, in writing down life, of certain narrative techniques to elicit a 'creative' response from her readers which, in turn, might activate a process of change. It is worth mentioning that Covito gave her story a subtitle, 'Una storia di vita raccontata da Carmen Covito' [A Life Story Told by Carmen Covito], which does not figure in either of the published versions.<sup>14</sup> The subtitle provides strong evidence in support of Jansen's reading of the story as a series of acts of storytelling and of the centrality, to the story itself and Jansen's interpretation, of its basis in real life. Covito reveals her multiple role as natural and implied narratee, as implied narrator and writer who turns an act of real-life storytelling into a written narrative which preserves the quality of oral storytelling. If narratives which dramatize the act of storytelling draw attention to the transactional nature of all narratives, namely to the exchange between two parties who meet textually either to co-operate or to combat against each other, an exchange that empowers narrative to produce change in human situations (Chambers 1984; Maclean 1988), in what kind of a battle does 'Tempo parziale' engage, who are the parties involved in the battle, and who wins? Monica Jansen asks similar questions from a different perspective to reveal the political and civic commitment of Covito's narrative and its potential to produce change. In this context it suffices to ask: has Covito's craft as a writer succeeded in seducing and persuading us to go on telling the story of this Italian working mother? Judging from the present reader, it has. It is hoped that the translation which is being published here

will take the story a bit closer to its original goal of disseminating its ‘point’ and making the human situation of working mothers in Italy known.

The final article in this Special Issue, ‘Working women in transition to motherhood in Italy’ by Sonia Bertolini, Rosy Musumeci, Manuela Naldini and Paola Maria Torrioni, brings us very close to today, presenting a qualitative study of interviews with twenty-one highly qualified mothers-to-be and their husbands or (male) partners, which were conducted in Turin in 2010–2012. The authors identify the factors influencing their interviewees’ work choices both during pregnancy and after the child’s arrival. It is of particular interest that the interviewees, some of whom had doctorates and occupied very good positions, were aged between thirty and thirty-nine, thus born during the 1970s and early 1980s, and had been raised in a big city in Northern Italy with a strong industrial tradition (Turin is home to Fiat), adhere to the ‘intensive mothering model’, believing that children require full-time care by one primary person during the early years of life and that this person should be the mother. This goes counter to recent comparative research showing that support for full-time mothering is higher among older women and women with lower levels of education, as well as among religious women (Charles and Cech 2010: 147, 149). Religion is not mentioned by the mothers-to-be from Turin, perhaps indicating that the Church has had no direct influence on their ideals and choices or that practical considerations overrule the Church’s dictates. The interviewees refer, however, to ‘readings’ they have drawn upon for their ideas and it would have been of interest to know which books, magazines or materials in other media such as the internet they may have read and which theories of child development, child psychology or child rearing they have been exposed to. Given their middle-class background, another important determinant might have been whether their own mothers had worked.

Covito’s protagonist, on the other hand, is ready and keen to return to work after a long period of maternity leave and happy to take her children to the crèche, despite its high costs.

She appears to espouse an ‘extensive model of mothering’, when, in an exchange with her twins, she ‘justifies’ her desire to return to work with the benefits for them as well as for herself (cf. Christopher 2010). The twins’ interventions and reactions throughout the story show unwavering and enthusiastic support for their mother’s ideas and decisions:

Quando hanno avuto otto mesi, è venuto il momento di rientrare al lavoro. E, per la verità, a quel punto non vedevo l’ora. Così ho cercato di mandarle al nido comunale, ma non c’era più posto. Okay, ho detto, se lavoro guadagno e se guadagno posso anche spendere, e le ho mandate al nido privato, un salasso pazzesco, ma ne valeva la pena. ‘Avevi bisogno di tornare in ufficio per avere il tuo spazio.’ Giusto, pinguina. Quante volte, facendo avanti e indietro tra casa e supermercato, supermercato e casa, ho fermato la macchina al paese vicino per passeggiare con la carrozzina doppia davanti alla vetrina della *mia* filiale, e intanto che sbirciavo incantata all’interno mi sentivo un po’ in colpa. Ma se tornavo a lavorare era meglio anche per voi due, mi dicevo. Non è mica sano avere una mamma costretta a fare la casalinga contro voglia che ti sta addosso tutto il giorno perché non ha niente altro di cui occuparsi e così ti fa diventare nevrotica come lei, giusto? ‘Giustone!’ (Covito 2009: 39)

[When they were eight months old, it was time for me to go back to work. And, to be honest, at that point I couldn’t wait to go back. So I tried to get them into the public nursery, but they had no places left. Okay, I said, if I work I earn and if I earn money I can also spend it and so I sent them to a private crèche, it cost an arm and a leg, but it was worth it. ‘You had to go back to work for a bit of space of your own’. That’s right, my little pony. How many times did I go back and forth between home and supermarket, supermarket and home, and how many times did I leave the car in the next

village so that I could stroll with the double pushchair past the window of *my* branch, and while I peeped inside, spellbound, I felt a bit guilty. But if I went back to work, it'd be better for you too, I kept telling myself. It wouldn't be healthy, would it, for you to have a mum forced to be a housewife against her will, who clings to you all day because she has nothing else to think about and makes you as neurotic as she is, right? 'More than right!']

The mother's problem is the obstacles the multinational she works for places in her way – its expectation of 100 per cent commitment from its employees to secure high productivity targets – and a crèche that closes too early. In the absence of a relative who can pick up and look after her twins in the afternoon, she cannot work full time. Here we are reminded that if, on the one hand, the Italian school schedule, as we have seen, helps female teachers to reconcile family and work, on the other it increases the pressure on mothers who are employed in other sectors. Both the interviews of the Turin study and the fictionalized testimony of the short story make us reflect on the persistence of the belief that mothering is a woman's natural, instinctive and expected role. At the end of her article, Jansen asks a poignant question: where is the protagonist's husband? He would like to help, we are told, but he cannot, as the poor devil works very long hours. Among the Turin couples, none of the male partners was considering taking parental leave: it was anticipated that the men's contribution to parenting would not come into play until the child had reached a certain age.

The difficulties and prejudices surrounding part-time work in today's Italy can also be heard loud and clear in the interviews of the mothers-to-be. Seen as the type of contract eminently suitable for mothers, part-time work was advocated by the historical feminist group *Libreria delle donne di Milano* (AA.VV. 2008) [Milan's Feminist Collective Bookstore] as a way to reclaim motherhood, yet without reaffirming the traditional maternal role. Part-time

work is, however, problematic in Italy for a number of reasons. First, as it is currently conceived in Italy, it carries, as we have seen, little job security and opportunity for career development and promotion. The interviewees are very aware of this. Secondly, the statistics for the period 2007–2012 show that, if there has been an increase in part-time female employment, the increase does not affect women with children, but women who would like full-time work but are unable to obtain it. Furthermore, part-time work has increased in parallel with a decrease in full-time work (Villa 2013). Thirdly, and interestingly, the arguments in favour of part-time work for mothers do not challenge, and indeed contribute to perpetuating, the belief in women's natural mothering role, thus sanctioning the Italian practice of entrusting the care of home and family primarily, and in many cases exclusively, to women (Falcinelli and Magaraggia 2013).

Covito's short story ends with the protagonist telling her twins, after giving up her job, of her plans to start her own company. We cannot be sure this will happen, but if it does, she will be an important role model for her daughters, who can thus become critical interlocutors who will take up the baton of change. What is sobering in 'Tempo parziale' is the fact that the protagonist's work choices are not driven by a belief in her own exclusive mothering abilities. Bertolini, Musumeci, Naldini and Torriani's study seems to indicate, instead, that the model of intensive mothering has returned among Italian women (or did they never really abandon it?), even among those who, like the Turin interviewees, as a result of their age and education, could have been shaped by alternative ideas and ideals. It appears that they have been caught in the above mentioned circular movement of upholding ideals of mothering which the institutional structures and the labour market also uphold and insidiously inculcate in the population only to then, ironically, stop them from fulfilling those ideals.

The latest measures and incentives introduced by the Italian government and taken up by some companies, to improve women's work opportunities after they have had a child –

such as ‘smart working’, which allows them to work from home with the support of modern technology – are underpinned by recent research which shows that the presence of women increases a company’s performance and encourages employers to value and capitalize on the skills that women acquire through motherhood (Anon 2015). While these are welcome developments, one wonders whether they are yet another way of keeping women in the home.

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<sup>1</sup> D'Amelia (1997) provides a fairly comprehensive account of motherhood in Italy from the Middle Ages to the 1990s. See also Fiume 1995 and D'Amelia 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Risorgimento [resurgence] is the movement that between 1815 and 1860 led to the Unification of the different states of the Italian peninsula under the Kingdom of Italy.

<sup>3</sup> See the following encyclicals: Leo XIII, *Arcanum divinae sapientiae* (1880), *Rerum novarum* (1891) and *Inimica vis* (1892); Pius X, *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907); Pious XI, *Casti connubii* (1930) and *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) (Momigliano and Casolari 1990). For a discussion of these encyclicals, see Koch 1997. For the Church's influence on the Italian family and related issues, see the chapter 'The Catholic Church' in Caldwell (1991: 7–27).

<sup>4</sup> Donatella Fischer (2006) identifies a shift already in the 1940s, in Eduardo De Filippo's plays *Napoli Milionaria!* (1945) and *Filumena Marturano* (1946), which presented strong and 'nontraditional' mothers. Fischer's reading of the character of Filumena Marturano seems to point to De Filippo's exposure of motherhood as a (bourgeois) construction.

<sup>5</sup> The word 'reconciliation' will be used in this Special Issue to refer to family-friendly policies and measures aimed at helping parents to harmonize work and parenting.

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<sup>6</sup> Yet, the Italians display less rigid and less observant attitudes than other countries, allowing practical needs to override religious beliefs or abiding by some of the Church's precepts only formally. A telling example is abortion, which was a widespread practice in Italy despite being illegal and being condemned by the Church (Triolo 1995).

<sup>7</sup> The current leave provisions are outlined in the article 'Working women in transition to motherhood in Italy' by Bertolini, Musumeci, Naldini and Torrioni in this Special Issue.

<sup>8</sup> There were other factors affecting women's reproductive choices in those years, among which are the critique and rejection of social and political institutions, including the family, and the violence that marked Italian life and politics (Scattigno 1997: 286–87).

<sup>9</sup> The term post-Fordism refers to a form of economic organization focusing on innovation and international competitiveness that emerged after Fordism, the post-war mode of economic growth of advanced capitalism taking its name from Henry Ford. 'Flexibility' is a key concept in post-Fordism which brings together its many and varied features: flexible production based on flexible equipments, flexible systems, flexible and networked firms. Post-Fordism entails a shift away from welfare states and jobs for life towards regimes that require full employability and a flexible workforce.

<sup>10</sup> Mulder and Billari (2014) demonstrate interesting correlations between organization of homeownership and fertility levels and provide useful comparative statistics for eighteen countries (seventeen European countries and the U.S.) relative to the year 2000. Southern European countries, including Italy, appear to belong to the 'difficult homeownership regime', characterized by high levels of homeownership, limited availability of mortgages, low fertility levels, and the latest timing of home-leaving. Italy also displays a high mean age at first motherhood.

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<sup>11</sup> These combined cultural and economic factors would explain the Italian phenomenon of *mammismo* ('mammism', from *mamma*, 'mum'), an overly protective maternal attachment to one's children and especially sons, which continues into the child's adult life. See Alvaro 1952 and D'Amelia 2005.

<sup>12</sup> For Law 300/1970, see <http://www.comune.jesi.an.it/MV/leggi/1300-70.htm> (accessed 20 March 2016).

<sup>13</sup> The Italian obsession with 'posto fisso', the permanent post, is the subject matter of a recent comedy film *Quo vado?* (2016, directed by Gennaro Nunziante). The film has been enormously successful in Italy and abroad (the highest grossing Italian film of all time). I am grateful to Claudia Bernardi who drew my attention to this film.

<sup>14</sup> Carmen Covito was kind enough to provide an electronic file of the Italian version. This version bears the subtitle in question. I am grateful to Carmen for providing the file and, with it, useful critical 'ammunition'.