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Rome Modern City

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## Stuck in the Past: Why the Italian Feminist Movement Didn't Have the Effects it Should Have

The study of gender roles is relevant in every major city, and for the most part, the status of women is due to feminist movements from decades ago. Being in Rome felt different than being in other major cities. The attention from men is constant and aggressive, and the women do not notice or mind it – at least they pretend not to. The dominant nature of men and submissive role of women make Rome seem like its stuck decades in the past, like walking into the city is walking into a time machine. From the first week I was in Rome, I wanted to know why, and how feminism allowed women to have this status. I sought to answer: how has the 1970's Italian feminist movement contributed to modern gender roles in relation to traditional values held by both men and women?

I will first establish what the 1970's Italian feminist movement is and how it played out. In my research, I learned that it consisted of ideas taken from other cultures that didn't necessarily fit into Italian society. Because of this, I will explore 1970's Italy through different lenses – history, beliefs, film, love, and church – in order to build an image of how the country functioned. With this image constructed, I will evaluate why the feminist movement didn't play out like it did in other countries, seeking the answer to why modern gender roles in Rome are the way that they are.

### I. 1970's Italian Feminist Movement

In the early-mid years of the cold war, Italy sparked an interest in French and American ways of life. They saw the French as more democratic and politically modern, even copying some of their

legislation. At the same time, the United States reciprocated their interest, looking to rebuild Italy's status as a modern and progressive nation. When the 1970's feminist movement started booming in France and the U.S., Italy was appropriately quick to follow (Bracke, 2014).

Italian thinkers formed their version of feminism based on French and American texts. They even felt they could use these ideas without needing to understand the motivations behind them (Bracke, 2014). This means that Italian feminism was not created by Italian women, but by women oceans away. As a result, the values that Italian feminists were adopting didn't coincide with other parts of Italian society.

In her journal article, Bracke quotes activist Yasmine Ergas who says, "Something specific happened in Italy. Of course, there was also [a] feminist awakening in France, the US, elsewhere. But in Italy, we were re-negotiating the very meaning of a normal life – everything was put into question" (2014). While Italians might have been fighting for the same rights as other industrialized countries, they had not yet learned how to stand on their own two feet. The French and Americans were ready for these changes to be implemented into *their* societies. Italy was not. They were asking for people to change their minds, for changes that didn't fit, and for too much.

## II. Cultural Determinism

Rome holds an "ideological generosity" inherent in its people's beliefs (Herzfeld, 2014). This means that while people might be theoretically open to diversity and inclusion, they only realistically accept it to a certain extent. This is not necessarily right or wrong, but just a product of cultural determinism. In other words, people are going to stick with the beliefs present in the culture they grew up in.

Cultural determinism is evident in the feminist movement because of the dynamics between women at the time. During the 1970's, Italian society held the assumption that non-Italian or culturally

mixed women living in Italy were “freer” than the typical Italian woman (Bracke, 2014). This could be caused by non-or-semi-Italians having grown up with even just slightly different cultural values that placed more importance on a woman’s independence, in conjunction with an Italian man’s socially accepted dominance over his Italian wife. Thus, this assumption would be rooted in the visible difference of how women were treated in a public space.

Herzfeld mentions that one part of Italians’ long-standing traditions is contradiction, always followed by defending themselves (2014). This is relevant in modern gender norms because men will chase after women in public, looking at them with “x-ray vision” (Baldrige 1956), saying things like, “You obviously need two men...to make love to all of you properly, and here we are, both of us, at your service,” as recorded by journalist Letitia Baldrige (1956). Then after, they will go home to be a loyal husband and loving father. This contradiction and defense have been integrated into Italian culture, making it harder for the Italian feminist movement to form the roots it needed to grow.

### III. Gender in Film

Films have a large impact on the direction that society moves because of their ability to visually display social situations. Italian films in the 1970’s constructed clear roles of men and women across the genres (Rigoletto, 2014). Men worked, women stayed in the kitchen, and as a result, these roles were strengthened in the real world. As feminist posters hung outside, women would watch a loyal housewife with a nice family on the television and see a virtually perfect life that was easily achievable.

Storylines in films also had political ties. A dominant male figure represented the authoritarian regime (Rigoletto, 2014), as if every man could be the dictator of his own household. It showed them how to properly “be a man,” while showing women in other roles. Filmed in 1970 but based in 1938, “A Special Day” is a film following Antonietta, “a woman who sees her role as a good housewife as parallel to the measure of her loyalty to the nation” (Rigoletto, 2014). Nationalism is displayed as

something every individual should contribute to, and this film visually displays how a woman can do so. Italy is very different in the 1930's and the 1970's, based on its vastly different political views. However, the film's production in the 1970's, in a 1930's setting, shows that while politics are different, the roles of women are still the same – a product of cultural determinism. Women can contribute to the nation in a positive way, and that is by being a good wife.

#### IV. How Italians Love

In the mid-1950's, Letitia Baldrige lived in Rome and observed male behavior, and her findings greatly coincided with a male's contradict-but-defend way of thinking. All women are put on a pedestal, "even if they aren't pretty." Men are romantics in their eyes, showing their affection visibly. She calls men "pappagalli," or parrots, because they roam the streets gawking at women (Baldrige, 1956). However, this is not meant to offend them. It is meant as a compliment. When a woman reacts negatively, men will often become angry, defending their actions.

Women are expected to stay "silently amused or aloof" because it is part of the tease. It is a game between men and women, building upon the constant tension between the sexes (Baldrige, 1956). She suggests that both sexes want men to have the upper hand and that women are happy under a man's domination and protection (Baldrige, 1956). Through this gender dynamic that Baldrige points out, both men and women are perpetuating gender stereotypes. By allowing a man to chase after her and engaging in a way that rewards a man, the woman is building upon the dominance-inferiority complex. She is building a gap between the two by letting the man know that it is okay to gawk at her. Men see this as playful, which is why the 1970's feminist ideas didn't fit. Women were still engaged in the chase by not being against it, which made "modern feminism" a radical idea.

#### V. The Vatican

The Vatican has also had a large impact on women's rights. It sees itself as a "state-like entity with moral guidance" on the international level, and has vocally opposed reproductive rights, abortion, and gender issues. It doesn't necessarily reject women's rights, but it rejects certain ideas that are lumped into Western feminism (Buss & Herman, 2003). While this affects all predominately Catholic countries, it has the biggest effect on Italy, and even more specifically, Rome. The Vatican's proximity to Rome has influenced social and political actions of Rome, and it is no different when it comes to feminism.

The Vatican acts as a moral parent to the city. As most people in Rome are Catholic, they value what the Vatican says, even if they don't personally agree with it. This has not only made it difficult to plant Western feminist ideas, but to agree with the more radical feminists when they blamed the Church. Because of its proximity, some feminists saw the Vatican as the cause of women's oppression (Buss & Herman, 2003). These feminists were taking on a much larger giant than a government, but an international religion. Men and women alike respected the Vatican and didn't want to disappoint their parent.

In his journal, Herzfeld says that social structures are always historical products (2014). If this is true, then today's gender norms are products of a city's historical past. It is difficult to say that the feminist movement was successful, but wrong to say it was a failure. It landed somewhere in between. It was not as successful in implementing gender equality by elevating a woman's status because Italian culture was not ready to accept new Western ideals. It's mild success and slight failure is the culmination of so much more than the movement was ready to take on. Feminists were using foreign ideas to fight cultural determinism, toxic masculinity, tradition, and two thousand years of the Vatican's watch over them. In Rome, there are still some clear divides in the genders, but if it's true

that Italy is a few decades behind, I'll be waiting for the second wave of the 1970's movement to find its footing.

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