

“Striking to Eat Better!”

Politics of Factory Meal in Italy, 1969-70.

Buongiorni e Ringraziamenti

The analysis and findings that I am going to present today are part of a doctoral research currently in progress, focused on industrial workers’ diet and factory canteens in Lombardy between the 1950s and 1980s.

Taking advantage of a well-grounded scholarship, my project investigates the relationship between dietary habits and work, an useful and fertile perspective to address several issues, including the political significance of foodways in historical perspective.

The relationship between food and politics constitutes a relevant topic that has been stressed by many influential scholars from various disciplines – like anthropology, sociology or history - developing interesting interpretative frameworks and carrying out analysis on a wide range of case studies.

These studies have also shed light on the deep links between foodways, socio-economic structures and power relations: such connections are not merely articulated by unilateral top-down patterns, rather constituting the outcome of a thick multilateral interaction among various social actors.

Today, in this presentation, I will focus the gaze especially on one specific agent of this multilateral relationship: the unionized blue-collar workers. In this perspective, I’m going to examine some symbolic and practical issues of workers’ struggles around factory meals

and feeding facilities during the so-called “Autunno caldo”, a sequence of strikes and social mobilizations that flared up in Italian industrial centers between 1969 and 1970.

Choosing to consider mainly blue collar’s agency is not only related to this presentation’s purposes, but also reflects the aim to enhance and present to you some original and significant historical sources, namely canteen committees records and workers’ shop floor bulletins.

In this view, periodization concerns were also important, as shown by the choice to analyze the “Autunno caldo”: a crucial point in contemporary Italian history, perceived as the apogee of industrial unions’ hegemonic power and workers militancy throughout the Twentieth century.

At the same time, I will stress the relevance of such mobilizations’ demands and outcome as a momentous leap for eating-out as a social habit and mass catering business sector, emphasizing the conflictual dynamics that shape affluent societies’ patterns of consumption.

In doing this, my presentation will unfold in three parts:

At first, I will describe the phenomenon of factory canteens in Italy during post-war decades, connecting workforce’s food habits with the "great transformation" of dietary regimes. Furthermore, the strikes of “Autunno caldo” will be placed in close relation with some critical aspects of the Italian economic boom, in terms of democracy and wealth allocation.

The second part will form the core of this paper, addressing blue-collars’ “struggles to eat better” between the end of Sixties and the Seventies, and examining workers’ institutions and agency at the shop-floor level.

Finally, I will make some concluding remarks, focusing mainly on political and symbolic implications of factory meal in Italian history, and analyzing the relation between workers’ food power, the change of industrial management policies and the growth of mass catering industry.

Factory Canteens During the “Economic Miracle”.

Since the mid-1950s, Italy went through a phase of strong economic development and profound social change, the so-called “Economic Miracle”. In less than two decades, the country was transformed from a largely agricultural society into a dynamic industrial nation, a momentous process marked by the rise of novel consumption patterns both on individual and mass scale.

In this perspective, foodways constitutes one of the most effective indicators to analyze this shift, describing country’s recovery from Second World War destructions and its landing - although with ambiguity and resistance - to a consumerist dimension.

During this phase, the "great transformation" of popular food habits assumes both quantitative and qualitative forms. While the scholars have largely analyzed the evolution of agribusiness and grocery stores, it is interesting to point out also the huge development of mass catering facilities and culture, including factory canteens.

In Italy, industrial canteens became popular on a national scale only throughout World War II, as a distinctive feature of wartime economy. Far from disappearing, during the following decades canteens were increasingly widespread and meal services for workers gradually became one of the most common features of social service in industry.

It must be outlined that labor legislation didn’t require the establishment of a proper canteen for white-collar and factory workers, prescribing only the establishment of generic dining halls in medium and large plants. For this reason, the diffusion of factory canteens must be traced back to the agency of the main actors involved: industrial firms, trade unions and workers.

In this sense, workers and unions’ efforts were crucial, pressing toward the acknowledgement of a “right to a nourishment” as a fringe benefit, by the set-up of canteens or by means of a cash allowance; an interesting feature of social and cultural dimension of wage forms in a long-time perspective.

For industrial management, the need to coordinate the production flow necessarily played a crucial role, coping with the multiple organization constraints and economic rhythms that shape manpower’s food intake during the workday.

In other words, the diffusion of factory canteens between 1950s and 1960s must be seen in relation with the profound changes into production sphere: the evolution of personnel management along with the intense mechanization and rationalization of working methods, entailed industrial management's effort to embed the lunch break into its sphere of authority.

Moreover, the increasing automation and mechanization brought about creating a psycho-physical nexus of a new type, modifying the energetic needs for industrial work and renewing the interest for medical and social aspects of workers' food habits.

Corporate's investments required an intensive use of industrial equipment: hence, worker's meals had to be served quickly and continuously, without stopping production flow. At the same time, it should be underlined the general trend toward the reduction of both working day and lunch break, made also possible by various technological and organizational solutions profoundly changing canteens, including the widespread diffusion of self-service distribution system.

Alongside astonishing industrial development and the first stirrings of consumer society, the 1950s in the factories were marked by ongoing labor exploitation, low wages and uncontested authority of industrial managements. Indeed, several scholars have properly pointed out the link between the diffusion of scientific managements techniques and trade unions' weakness and political division.

A harsh situation that constitutes the flip side of the economic miracle's coin, also explaining the significance and the intensity of industrial conflicts flared up during the 1960s and the Seventies.

These strikes and mobilization express the discontent of a working class that had profoundly changed in its composition, since thousands of young people – often from southern Italy - flooded into the cities and factories of the north.

A new generation of low-skilled workers employed in basic, repetitive tasks, experiencing the constraints of industrial development into the plants, eager to achieve higher standards of living and gaining the access to mass consumption goods.

These fundamental shifts lead to an inevitable change of industrial workers' mentalities and patterns of political participation.

Not surprisingly, the struggles of the “Autunno caldo” were accompanied by a profound renewal of trade unions’ strategies: establishing factory councils elected by workers; emphasizing the role of assemblies; forming specific committees to supervise and control every aspect of factory life: wages, production methods and rhythms, industrial health and, of course, factory canteens.

“Striking to Eat Better”.

As mentioned before, the lack of specific legislative regulation meant that the development of factory canteens in Italy must be traced back to the dynamics of industrial relations, and especially to collective bargaining agreements signed at the company or single plant level.

Such circumstances obviously concurred in shaping a reality that is far from homogeneous if we compare various companies and even single plants within the same firm.

Therefore, it seems clear that labor mobilizations that shook up factories and industrial centers between the end of Sixties and 1970s also assume a periodizing significance for the development of industrial catering, due to the increasing trade unions’ political centrality and hegemonic power within the Italian society.

Indeed, a renewed workers’ request for a decent meal service paid by the employer strongly emerged during this phase, also in small and medium enterprises: an ongoing social demand clearly demonstrated by sources – unions’ platform and collective bargaining above all – data and other many indicators.

For example, just over a decade the number of factory canteens doubled up, from 1500 to over 3000 in 1972, with a decisive leap during the “Autunno caldo”; a leap that provided the bedrock of industrial catering continuous growth throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Regarding workers' point of view, firstly it must be underlined that the provision of a meal largely or entirely paid by the employer constituted a major opportunity to protect wage's purchasing power, especially during a phase marked by a rising inflation like the 1970s.

At the same time - as we have already suggested - sources repeatedly shed light on the highly symbolic and cultural meaning of food during the workday. In this sense, having a rich and nutritious meal provided by the employer – during a proper lunch break spent in hygienic and restful dining halls - was a substantial recognition of professional status and decency, claimed with ever increasing assertiveness.

Growing demand for an adequate meal service and labor's day-to-day control on the functioning of canteens, are pursued by the new worker's organisms – the factory councils – and by specific committees – generally named “canteen committee” – on a plant level.

Factory Council's and committee's right to control the general operation of canteens was formally established by the Statuto dei Lavoratori – Worker's Bill – approved in 1970 by the Parliament.

However, in the concrete day-to-day practice, industrial food policies were still a contested terrain of bargaining and confrontation between managements and unions: for example, with regard to workers' delegates authority to inspect supplies or kitchens, supervising cooking operations, collaborate in drafting menus, and influencing the outsourcing of canteen service.

One of the most important feature of factory councils' ideology, was the emphasis on social intellect and workers' direct participation; this stance was strictly related to the concrete, common working experience of every laboring individual, and it could took various forms including periodic surveys or review books to assess the canteen service.

As union's and councils' power increased, canteens and dining halls became a true political arena to hold assemblies and meetings, distributing press or propaganda materials, and exerting workers' control over the production process.

In this sense, obtaining an adequate lunch break; leaving the shop-floor to eat comfortably; reducing queues at the self-service to gain leisure time; and requesting a greater choice of better cooked foods, represented different attempts to enhance human factor and professional status.

Furthermore, it could also be underlined the democratic and egalitarian attitude of workers' struggles over industrial food policies, as very well explained by the various mobilization to extend canteen service also to shift workers, who were frequently forced to bring their meals from home and sometimes consuming them at the shop-floor to assure the continuity of production flow.

In accordance with renewed occupational health's orientations – based on prevention and the removal of industrial risk – laborers' "struggles to eat better" clearly shown a political attempt to interpretate the food-health nexus.

Into this frame, factory councils frequently indicate kitchens and dining halls as unhealthy sites, targeted for proper intervention to adapt facilities, sanitize rooms and improve working conditions.

This meant requiring the installation of ventilation hoods and fans into the kitchen rooms to meliorate staff working conditions. Or, alternatively, providing the dining halls with windows to ensure adequate natural lightning, improving clean services, pest control, and setting ventilation systems or acoustic panels especially when canteens were closed to manufacturing areas.

Another fascinating issue – although pretty difficult to address – is that concerning the attitudes and dietary choices of factory canteens consumers.

Of course, resuming thousands of workers' disposition toward canteen's food regimes is impossible, but I think that it is interesting to present some general insights on what consumers considered as a proper healthy meal.

Without suggesting a large - and maybe a little bit anachronistic – deep consciousness among manpower on the virtues of healthy dietary patterns, I would like to point out the salience of the link between diet and health in archival sources, surveys, comic strips and other visual or edited sources, stressing the importance of factory canteens as a mean to protect and improve employee's well-being.

At the same time, the analysis of factory menus and other various sources indicate a suggestive overlapping between the idea of a proper meal – described as healthy or nutritious – and the recurrence of traditional dietary patterns.

In this sense, during the Sixties and the Seventies, Italian industrial workers claimed a lunch cooked on the spot based on the gastronomic scheme main course (mainly pasta)-second course-side dish, quite abundant in terms of calories and nutrients.

Moreover, factory employees – especially blue-collar workers - frequently asked to replace centralized cooking systems with canteens equipped with full kitchens, in order to solve practical problems – like a cold pasta or a rubbery steak - but also to avoid intermediate manipulation and bringing together cooking and eating practices.

For the sake of brevity, I will avoid examining the widespread concerns about specific food adulteration - especially regarding oil and wine – by moving on to address the general mistrust of factory workers toward some industrial foodstuff.

It must be underlined that this attitude was common not only among industrial employees, rather constituting a specific feature of the “Italian way” to affluent dietary regimes, explaining – for example – the well-established dislike of frozen meals: certainly very practical for mass catering but frequently regarded with unwavering suspicion, despite the dietary assurance and moral suasion by nutritionists and managements.

Citizens of a Consumers' Republic.

Having outlined some features of industrial manpower's struggles around food at the workplace during the Autunno caldo, I would like to address few final remarks and sketch some general trends about worker's diet throughout the following decades.

As we have seen, unionized workers' mobilizations were a significant driving force for industrial catering cultures and practices in Italian context; in fact, this emerging, conflictual demand was met by the ongoing outsourcing of factory canteen services to professional mass catering firms.

This transition gradually puts an end to industrial management's direct intervention on employee's dietary habits, undermining the traditional paternalistic ideal of factory canteens as well.

Encouraged by the increasing demand of standardization and professional expertise in catering sector, this shift must also be explained with industrial firms aim to reorient budgets, focusing on primary productive mission and pulling back from a highly contested terrain.

With regard to feeding facilities, during the Seventies a well-grounded industrial relations system gradually emerged, based on three main agents - management, catering firms and factory councils – whose prerogatives were specified in outsourcing agreements. For example, sometimes workers' councils could only negotiate with company management, but in other contexts canteen committees was clearly pointed as an official supervision organism, alongside company's medical staff and public authorities.

Such changes seem to reflect very well-known trends in modern economic systems, marked by the striking emergence of service sectors and the ongoing multilevel interweave between industry and service sector.

Many scholars have underlined that - during the economic boom - the definitive rupture of a secular poor food regime determined a tumultuous acquisition of affluent dietary standards for the working and middle classes, setting food consumption as a true status symbol; a long-desired and powerful vehicle of socio-cultural integration, into a modern consumers' republic.

In this perspective, at the peak of worker's centrality and social activism, the struggles to eat better at the factory assert the agency of the consumer-worker as a fully integrated citizen, craving for a social status, along with abundant - and somehow traditional - dietary standards.

To conclude, I hope this paper has offered an interesting and stimulating contribution to our discussion, investigating the relevance of industrial laborers' struggles for mass catering development in modern Italy, and highlighting the political and cultural meaning of workers' diet.

Adopting a perspective placed on the ridge between the spheres of production and consumption, I tried to propose a non-teleological analysis of the "great transformation" of food habits, emphasizing the conflicts that shaped social relations and resource distribution in history.

An interpretative framework based on the hypothesis that dynamics arising from labor relations constitute one of the main drivers of social change in the contemporary age.

Thanks for the attention.