

The Self-Service Revolution in Italian Factory Canteens, 1950-1970

Introduction

What I'm going to share with you today, is part of a doctoral research still in progress, focused on the phenomenon of factory canteen and mass catering for industrial workers between 1950s and 1980s.

In this view, worker's meal consumption and factory canteens seems an interesting perspective to analyze the change of dietary patterns in Italy during the second half of 20th Century.

As the title shows, the aim is to analyze the introduction of self-service in Italian canteens, outlining the evolution of meal service for workers from the Second World War, and showing the various innovative aspects of self-service.

World War II and the Origins of Factory Canteens in Italy.

Differing from other industrialized countries such as France, Great Britain and Germany, in Italy factory canteens became a widespread phenomenon only during Second World War.

In the years leading up to the conflict, marked by autarkic policies and the country's preparation for war effort, Fascist regime and Confindustria (the entrepreneurs syndicate) had launched an ambitious campaign to "ruralize the industry."

Within this framework, there were thus many industrial enterprises intervening in food systems through various measures: from production (running farms or fisheries), through processing activities (like mills, bakeries or dairies), to distribution and consumption level (establishing inter-firm supply associations or company stores).

After the declaration of war and as the conflict dragged on, the entire food strategy of Mussolini's regime gradually collapsed.

Soaring prices, shortages, rise of the black-market and rationing measures, heavily worsened the living conditions of civil population, especially in urban areas.

Looking at the first half of the 20th century, many scholars have stressed the role of "total war" experiences as driving forces of economic, institutional and cultural dynamics that profoundly affected human societies in the following decades.

It is precisely within this interpretive setting that we can situate the origins and the definitive establishment of factory canteens in Italian industries.

Alarmed by strikes and concerned over the physical exhaustion of the industrial workforce, Fascist regime and enterprises massively promoted the setting up of canteens, in order to provide workers with at least one hot meal a day.

Actually, most of the efforts to operate industrial canteens were faced by the enterprises.

Factory managements had to set up adequate facilities for increasing numbers of users; furnishing the kitchens with suitable equipments; recruiting the staff needed for operation; dealing with the practical day-to-day organization of the service, such as the payment system.

Enterprises were also expected to provide for a large amount of food provision, either by means of their own supply chains or through market purchases.

Because of the complicated background, canteens were characterized by their austere features and military-like settings.

For example:

- adapted, bare rooms filled with long tables and benches;
- an essential and hurried distribution service;
- the obsession with speed and discipline;
- plates and tins made of aluminium, like those used by the soldiers.

In terms of dietary-nutritional aspect, canteens were essentially concerned with providing a simple and hygienically safe meal, avoiding waste of any sort.

The standard menu basically consisted of a “minestra”, a soup with vegetables and pasta or rice, or alternatively a “minestra rinforzata” (enriched with lard or offal). If available, the second course consisted of a piece of cheese or few slices of cured meat, served with boiled vegetables.

Finally, wine was served daily, being conceived as an essential caloric supplement and a traditional element of popular food habits.

During this phase marked by the profound crisis of political power, particularly after the collapse of Mussolini’s regime and the split of the country, the factory as institution, assumed an unprecedented social and symbolic significance.

A significance gained also by means of the welfare policies (including the canteens) that enabled the concrete survival of factory workers and their families during that dramatic period. A symbolic role that conveyed expectations of reconstruction and progress, which would not fade in the aftermath of the conflict.

Factory Canteens in the Immediate Post-War.

The first decade after World War II, saw factory canteens becoming a common institution of corporate’s welfare policies.

This was a gradual and trending process, normalizing an institution that played a crucial role during the previous years. However, it’s important to underline that this process was not linear and entirely predictable, due to the presence of different pushes from various actors.

Firstly, it should be pointed out that legislative regulations didn’t require the establishment of a canteen service for white-collar and factory workers.

Both the legislation introduced by Fascism (dating back to 1927) and the Regolamento di Igiene del Lavoro of 1956, prescribe the establishment of generic “refettori” (dining halls), imposing the obligation to set up canteens only for large mining industries.

That’s the reason why the ultimate institutionalization of canteens in Italy cannot be traced back to legislative prescriptions, but rather remained the result of interaction and bargaining among the main actors involved: industrial enterprises on one hand, unions and employees on the other.

Among managerial milieu there were opposing visions toward industrial canteens.

Pointing back the high costs to maintain these institutions during the war, some entrepreneurs (for example Angelo Costa, the president of Confindustria) considered the canteens as an anachronistic benefit, that had to be dismantled with the normalization of social and economic situation.

These trends led to a reduction in the overall number of canteens (especially in smaller enterprises), but certainly not to their ultimate disappearance.

In this perspective, the agency of workers and unions was very important.

Resuming workers’ attitude toward canteen service it’s quite difficult: we cannot exclude that the will to escape from the harsh experience of industrial life and the memory of the austere atmosphere of canteens during the war, fostered the desire to spend lunch breaks outside the factories.

However, during the postwar years, a new “moral economy” emerged, and the labor unions strongly asserted a “right to nourishment” for white-collar and factory workers, through the set up of canteens or by means of a cash allowance.

Among the managers there were also attitudes for keeping and updating the canteens to the renewed situation.

Although conceived as a voluntary and unilateral benefit, the provision of a meal service for employees was a useful tool for improving working conditions and ensuring social and political stability.

The adoption and reshape of managerial methods imported from the United States, like the “Human Relations” doctrine, modified and actualized the paternalistic pattern that characterized welfare policies from its origins. In fact, within the space of the enterprise, notions of family and community tended to blur, increasing the centrality of collective meal as a symbolic moment.

Pictures and archival sources on industrial canteens during the postwar period, shows the persistence of traditional dietary patterns, as well as the lack of innovation in terms of spatial, technological and organizational models and norms.

Meal provision in factories serve to fill up and correct nutritional gaps in worker’s diet. Choice among various dishes was extremely limited, when not entirely impossible. The meal pattern corresponds to the Italian tradition: a first course (pasta, rice or soup), a second course (meat or dairies), a side of vegetables, bread and wine.

Layout consisted of long series of mid-large tables, separated by service aisles: the diners take their seats (marked by worker’s serial number, or with their work unit), finding the table already set.

Distribution was carried out by large teams of servers, pushing serving trolleys between the kitchen and the dining hall, handling the pickup of dirty plates and cleaning up.

In most cases, canteen service was directly operated by the enterprises, although sometimes the service was contracted out to specialized management, especially restaurant or tavern owners.

As we have seen, during this phase, spatial, dietary and technical standards of canteens were rooted in traditional models, as the culture of table service.

These institutions also work with largely empirical methods, and the organization was marked by structural constraints, like reservation system, the fixity of personal seats in the dining room, or the large staffs required for distribution.

The Self-Service Revolution in Italian Factory Canteens.

By the second half of the 1950s, Italy went through a phase of intense economic development and profound change in social structures, known as the "economic boom", also marked by the emergence of new consumption patterns.

In fact, it's precisely during this phase that we can situate the "self-service revolution" within Italian canteens. A revolution which is deeply entangled with other transformations that invested the structure of food habits, along with distribution systems.

In contrast to other European countries (such as France and Germany), self-service restaurants were a ground-breaking innovation for the Italian context.

Since the 1950s, trade catering journals fostered the diffusion of self-service in factory canteens, emphasizing three factors:

- The rationalization of methods and spaces.
- Time savings achieved due to the efficiency of distribution lines.
- The possibility to reduce operating costs, reducing servers staff.

In addition, counters based on modular units, to keep food at serving temperature, provided adequate flexibility: in fact, if the number of customers increased, canteen management could stretch distribution lines or add new ones.

Great emphasis was also placed on the innovative aspects of the self-service system: the use of plastic materials and stainless steel; the equalize of Italian factory canteens to the standards already reached in other European countries; the efficiency of "modern" systems over traditional methods, described as "irrational".

Italian firms such as Zoppas and Zanussi (producers of white goods and professional kitchen equipment), adopted self-service technology quickly and imposed themselves as the leading supplier on the national market.

Fundamental was the predilection encountered by the self-service among industrial entrepreneurs that intended to reorganize or implement factory canteens.

Several reasons fostered the introduction of this innovative system:

- Firstly, the aim to improve workers productivity led to greater attention to the "human factor" and its needs, including those about fisiology and nutrition.
- In addition, technological investments required an intensive use of industrial equipment. Hence, white-collar and workers had to be served quickly, without stopping the continuous flow of production.
- Lastly, the trend toward the reduction of the working day in offices and industries, implied the shortening of the lunch break.

The introduction of innovative methods in canteens, and the need to coordinate large numbers of people in a shorter amount of time, implied an effort to educate customers about this new system. Nowadays, the logics related to the self-service appear absolutely “normal”, but at that time they weren’t: every step, from tray’s collection to the return of it, needed to be explained to the workers. As pointed out by mass catering specialists, the aim was to persuade workers leaving the assembly line to have their meals, to enter in another distribution line for feeding themselves.

Some evidences, suggest a contested acceptance of this new system by the customers: for example, skilled workers and white-collars regret table service, considered as a symbol of professional status. Canteen customers were also disappointed for the long queues, complaining about timelines and about the request to return trays on conveyor belts.

On the other hand, the adoption of self-service made possible to achieve significant savings on servers staff, which was the main expense in the operation of canteens. Those savings allowed the possibility to invest more on meal preparation, introducing a greater variety of daily dishes in the menu. Choosing between two (sometimes even three) main and second courses, meant an unprecedented situation of abundance for customers that helped to fight the opposition against self-service system.

From Revolution to Norm: Self-Service as Standard for Factory Canteen.

Between 1950s and 1960s, the decision by few large companies (like ENI, Olivetti and Pirelli) to reorganize their canteens, constituted a significant moment for the introduction and spread of self-service system.

These firms were innovative leaders of a country that was undergoing a whirlwind of unprecedented industrial and economic development. All of these companies had implemented articulated welfare policies and were bearers of a cutting-edge corporate culture.

Not surprisingly, the reorganization of this factory canteens through the adoption of self-service, had wide circulation in the following years. In fact, architecture and design magazines, journals on mass catering and industrial management reviews, depicted these canteens as innovative examples of modernity and efficiency.

The 1960s saw a remarkable expansion of the phenomenon of industrial canteens. The number of these institution rose from an estimated 1,500 in 1957, to over 3,000 attested in a 1972 survey.

This growth constitute an expression of a widespread and renewed attention of industrial managements for employee’s dietary habits. Moreover, the increase in number is due to the pressure provided by workers and industrial unions.

During that decade the rise of inflation prompted workers to demand more and more provisions of factory canteens, paid mostly by the employers. These were strategies for recovering wages and purchasing power indirectly. Renewed forms of the “right to food support” that emerged strongly in the aftermath of the war.

Prompted by the emerging power of industrial unions after the mobilizations of the so called “Autunno caldo” (1969), these workers’ claims expressed also an updated consciousness about occupational health. Within this framework, it is not surprising that workers’ struggles for healthier and safer factories led also to a widespread demand for canteens, identifying the relation between work and health in a dietary perspective as well.

During this phase, self-service emerged as the most popular and efficient system for providing meals, becoming the standard model for canteens design.

There were numerous factors that promoted the growing fortunes of self-service:

- Firstly, the increasing distance between workers' homes and workplaces: far from constituting a new trend, it was now accentuated by the growing urbanization and related phenomenon (like traffic and commuting), which precluded workers' return to their home for lunch.
- Secondly, the gradual reduction of daily working hours, closely linked to the increasing saturation of labour time and the diffusion of shift working.
These trends required a strict coordination for meal breaks: the imperative to not to stop the flow of production encouraged the adoption of self-service, for its speed and flexibility.
- Third, the development of new cooking and food preservation methods, and the diffusion of pre-cooked foods. In this sense, self-service proved to be functional for centralized cooking systems of pre-cooked and re-heated meals, that became increasingly popular from the 1960s.
- The reduction of labour costs in mass catering made possible by self-service, opened up attractive profit margins. The possibility to achieve substantial earnings from canteens running, constituted a crucial element for the emergence of mass catering business, from the second half of 1960s.
In other terms, mass catering companies conceived the self-service technology as an essential infrastructure: a system by which they could expand profit margins, increasing efficiency parameters or realizing economies of scale.

Due to the combination and interrelation of the factors mentioned above, throughout the 1960s and beyond, the quantitative leap of canteens in Italian factories went at the same pace as the diffusion of self-service methods.

As we have seen, self-service was an innovative meal distribution system introduced in Italy during the late 1950s, with technological, spatial and dietary implications far more profound than it might seem at first glance. Implications and logics on which, we hope, this paper has helped to shed light.

Since the paper presented today is part of a doctoral research still in progress, I hope to have underlined the importance of factory canteens as an interesting perspective to analyze the change of food consumption patterns during the Italian "economic boom".

Factory canteens represent highly symbolic subject of this "great transformation", like other institutions far better analyzed by historiography, such as supermarkets and motorway restaurants.

Shaped by the adoption of self-service system, and reorganized according with rational, modern and efficiency logics, between 1950s and 1960s these "consumption spaces" stand as both prism and vectors of this epochal change, symbols of a society definitively on its way to a plentiful consumption regime.