

# Feed Your Baby Like a Fascist

*Published 24 December 2022, with Diana Garvin and my friend Susan.*

*At the end of the episode on [mothers' milk](#), Professor Amy Brown mentioned an important source of anxiety for new mothers: they cannot easily see how much their baby has eaten, and that pushes them to use a see-through bottle and switch from breast to formula. It may surprise you to learn that the Italian Fascist regime came up with a solution 90 years ago.*

*In this episode, Professor Diana Garvin provides some insights into Fascist breastfeeding, and a friend of mine explains how it lingered on to traumatise mothers 50 years on, and continues to do so today.*

**Diana:** The doppia pesata, the double weighing. You weigh a child before you breastfeed. You look at the clock. Supposedly the infant latches on immediately. You breastfeed for a certain amount of time and then you put the baby back down on the scale to determine the exact amount of breast milk that they have consumed.

**Jeremy:** That's Diana Garvin, a historian of fascism, especially as it relates to food. You may remember I talked to her about fascists and coffee. Anyway, the fascists were very keen on motherhood.

**Diana:** Mother's Day in Italy was invented during the fascist period, and it fell at a different time of year. It was December 24th.

**Jeremy:** Which is why this is going out today, 92 years later.

**Diana:** Originally meant to coincide with the mother Mary's labor pains. Ostensibly.

**Jeremy:** But of course, there were ulterior motives.

**Diana:** The Italian fascist regime regarded breastfeeding as a form of mass production belonging to the state. Benito Mussolini had famously said nothing against the state, nothing outside the state, and that meant that every single person belonged to the regime and everything that they produced, whether it was chemicals in a factory

in the city, whether it was wheat in a country field, or whether it was even breast milk to feed a child, belonged to the regime.

**Jeremy:** The regime may have regarded mother's milk as belonging to them, but they also put some effort into sweetening the deal for mothers.

**Diana:** They built a series of new obstetric clinics that were entire health care centres. So they included cafeterias to feed breastfeeding mothers. They included breastfeeding rooms. The idea was that that the regime would be able to control what a mother ate, with the ultimate goal of creating stronger, healthier Italians to be the soldiers and mothers of a super generation to come. It was part of an industrialisation of motherhood as a whole. The regime believed that they would be able to control the exact times that an infant would feed and that they would be able to control the exact amount. So the Orario, which is this timed schedule for breastfeeding a child, went hand in hand with another method which is called the Doppia Pesata, the double weighing.

**Susan:** But it seemed to totally disrupt the magic of the process.

**Jeremy:** And that's a friend of mine, Susan, who, as a fresh young American, settled in Rome, got married and had a baby — Italian style.

**Susan:** It was very stressful. It made me very, very conscious that I was very responsible for getting all of the nutrition my child needed into him. The measuring him before and trying to understand how many grams of milk he actually took in — 60, 70, 80 — it was all completely abstract to me. It seemed to have nothing to do with looking at him, seeing if he was happy, having a good feed. It made me feel terribly inadequate.

For me, coming from the United States, being expected to understand this whole process was a very big shift. When a child is hungry, a child screams for food. And my son had incredible lungs. And when he was hungry, you knew it instantly and you could never feed him fast enough. It was, Oh, my God, he's crying in another hour and a half. Oh, did he not even then have enough? You know, is it sufficient to know intellectually that he ate 90 grams and think, oh, so he should be satisfied? Well, what if he isn't? What do the grams have to do with anything? It, it, it ...

I felt at the end, I just didn't know if he'd had enough. And then, if he cried an hour later, two hours later, was it because he didn't have enough over the arc of a day, over the arc of two days, that particular feeding? You know, also, I'm not a numbers person, so maybe if I had been more of a scientific bent, it wouldn't have been such an effort for me. But for me, it was a terrible effort. And ... I don't know, I just I think because of the stress of that, I didn't last more than two and a half months breastfeeding.

**Jeremy:** And this was in the 1980s, not the 1930s. The fascist past certainly has a way of clinging on. The question arises, of course, of why, beyond the need for workers and cannon fodder, why did the regime feel it necessary to intervene in motherhood?

**Diana:** The mother could not be relied on. Mothers were viewed as being inherently irrational. The word rational and rationalism was really a byword for this period. What it means is ruling with thought and science rather than with gut feeling. Mothers were seen as being more allied with nature, as being more sentimental, and fascism was trying to drive against those ideas.

**Jeremy:** Splendid. Rationality rules. but rational is not quite the same as logical.

**Diana:** Mussolini might have been able to tell a black-shirt soldier what to do, but you actually cannot tell a two month old what to do. So timed breastfeeding does not work. And yet the regime continued to push this type of mothering behavior, even against evidence that it was not producing stronger, better babies. The semblance of a new mathematical, rational approach to breastfeeding actually mattered more than feeding babies more milk.

**Jeremy:** So the timed feeding and the double weighing didn't really work. But to me, a lot of the efforts the fascists made to support mothers and infants seem quite progressive.

**Diana:** So many of the fascist regime interventions appear progressive on the surface, things like introducing breastfeeding rooms to factories. It's something that we still don't have particularly widespread in the United States today, despite legislation promoting it. At the same time, the intention behind interventions like this was incredibly regressive. The idea was to get as much work, both productive and reproductive, out of mothers as possible. And despite

the regime claims that a woman's place was in the home, they desperately needed as many Italians working in both fields and factories as possible.

**Jeremy:** And even fascist beggars can't be choosers. So the maternity clinics specifically also welcomed unmarried mothers.

**Diana:** Women who were unmarried under the fascist regime found themselves in a very difficult and a very strange position, because on one hand they were still celebrated as mothers. There was almost a martyrdom about them in the official rhetoric. These women would like to be productive members of our society. They would like to have the full family and, lacking a breadwinner, they are going to take up that work. The regime is so concerned with promoting demographic power — because we are still in a period where a large population is equivalent to a nation's military might — that in some senses being unmarried but still keeping your child overrode concerns for whether a mother was married or not.

**Jeremy:** The thing is, while the regime could encourage mothers — married and unmarried — to breastfeed and offer them special meals and special places to promote breastfeeding, not all women could breastfeed and not all women wanted to. So how did the regime deal with that?

**Diana:** Generally speaking, they would prefer to see a baby fed and they did prefer wet nursing as a practice to the use of other animal milks. Wet nursing was actually big business for much of the early 20th century. It was at the time as common as hiring a cook, hiring a maid; very widespread practice for the nascent middle class and above. There were even wet nursing centres where you could drop off your child for the day, or you could hire a wet nurse to live in your home. There are, however, rafts of press from the period ... In fact, I remember a poll of Roman doctors and pediatricians that framed, quote, the problem of the wet nurse as being one of hygienic and unhygienic environments, because some of these places that wet nurses worked were ... Well, they described them as, I believe, lurid and fetid, dense environments that were altogether unhealthy. In terms of that anti wet nursing push, it looks like it was largely aimed at women that did have the ability to breastfeed but who chose not to. What the regime really seemed to object to was women making that choice.

**Jeremy:** And there's another idea that clings on. In the end, I do wonder why the fascists latched onto breastfeeding. Maybe because it is the perfect embodiment of an idea very dear to them. The idea of self sufficiency.

**Diana:** Breastfeeding in many ways is the ultimate foodway. It's the oldest, tightest, simplest foodway. So it provides a useful metaphor for thinking about what the regime aspired to do, which is to achieve autarky: ultimate economic independence from trade partners that would allow it to act unilaterally in terms of military aggression on the world stage. And in some ways, the fascist regime never managed to do what mothers and infants did every day.

**Jeremy:** Was that a failure?

**Diana:** I would say that it was.

**Susan:** I hated that book. I hated the pencil, I hated the balance. I hated the whole thing. Weighing, weighing a child, a screaming child, going for the book for the numbers. Even afterwards doing all of those ... those little technical things, so remove you, I think, from the natural beauty of the process. If I had been a more scientific type, maybe it wouldn't have weighed so heavily on my heart and soul, but it certainly did. I didn't really want it to be in the way in the way of us of being a mother and child.

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