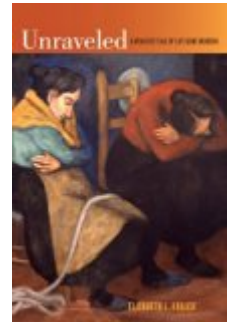


Elizabeth L. Krause. *Unraveled: A Weaver's Tale of Life Gone Modern*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. xx + 282 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-25849-5.



Reviewed by Lauren E. Forcucci

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Commissioned by Abby L. Drwecki (Indiana University)

Elizabeth L. Krause's book, *Unraveled*, is a thought-provoking and magnificently crafted piece of work. Krause begins her tale by stating that "this book tells the story of a person without history" (p. 1). She uses weaving as the vehicle by which she spins a personal and complex account. She tells the story of young women coming of age under fascism's iron fist and the varied cultural roots that explain fertility decline in Italy. Her narrative is both descriptive and hauntingly alive. She uses a thorough methodology that encapsulates the local feelings, global emotions, and the broader scope of wartime sentiments, all of which color her monograph. Krause's personal interactions with the individuals "without history" are central to her account. She adeptly uncovers their lost and ignored pasts and breathes life into their potentially forgotten experiences. Her participant-observation techniques far exceed the traditional recording and presentation of findings. Rather, Krause becomes part of the story and lures the reader into the description by providing intricate and personal details that allow the reader to feel

that this unnoticed history is no longer over and done, but alive and relevant.

As the narrative slowly unravels, she leads the reader into the world of rural Tuscany during Benito Mussolini's rule. The fear, loathing, and uncertainty of the period is made evident through the personal stories she skillfully relays. As she guides the reader into the world of Emilia and Perigi Peruzzi, she tells how relationships among women and those between women and men revealed a subtext. Women's historic roles were and continue to be a central focus of Italian female identity. However, as globalization in its nascent stages began to take hold, women in particular started to feel a shift not only in national politics, but also in body politics. Women were the bearers of children and tradition and held "a sense of pride that sprang from the secrets they cultivated and kept" (p. 32). While this quiet revolution waged, its ramifications were thunderous.

With the onset of war, women's "quiet revolution" bespoke various layers of defiance and the

emerging gender and generational crises. Krause notes that the use of the term “unraveled” is both literal and figurative. This is quite clear as the reader turns each page. For example, the proliferation of fascism and the spread of ideology and propaganda revealed great divisions in the fears and expectations of individuals. Some felt the opportunity to revolt, others the urge to hide. However, all agreed, as summed up in a conversation translated by Krause, that “the fascists do not take kindly to those who disagree with them” (p. 38). The traces of trepidation and abhorrence are evident in such a statement, as are the traumatic effects that scarred many individuals’ memories.

As the fascists used forceful language and scare tactics to encourage and compel Italians to do as they said, trauma was influencing how decisions were being made. The countryside, while at first glance appearing to be far removed from the bustling but morally corrupt city, was not lacking in political awareness. Krause notes that “it’s no simple feat to raise consciousness in the countryside, but it’s not impossible either” (p. 45). The social consciousness of peasant classes ran deeper than most scholars describe. Krause reveals this quite adeptly in her research; she states that the “seeds of protest ... [and] the kernels of reform” were always on the minds of the ignored peasant (p. 46). The rural lifestyle, often looked down upon as a peasant life, is far more dynamic than is often credited. The pressures, deeply espoused in both gender and cultural roles, must not be overlooked. What did it mean to be a woman living in rural Tuscany during the war? How did gender roles change and persist? Most important, how did these factors contribute to declining birthrates?

While il Duce declared a battle against declining birthrates, women revolted and protested against a control of their bodies. During his speech, families, as described by Krause, crowded around radios to hear il Duce’s robust cries for an end to moral and societal ills and a call for repro-

duction, repopulation, and a resurgence of historic Rome. Abortions were declared illegal, contraceptives banned, and births encouraged. Women were epitomized and stigmatized as the re-creators of the Italian state. They were to be bountiful and perform their duties willingly as traditional mothers and as producers of babies.

As the war continued, women contributed to society in various ways. As Krause writes, women were weaving and giving to their homes but were beginning to seek alternatives. Emilia, for example, was waiting for her *fidanzato* (fiancé) to return from war, yet in the meantime was contemplating her options and continued to weave. She represented a cultural contrast to the the “traditional model.”

Italy today, like many other European countries, sits at the lowest levels of demographic measurements. As Krause says, it is more than ideology and revolt. “The rumblings of change” were at work (p. 133). Women were rethinking the consequences of their stigmatized stations and considering how to change.

For instance, Emilia experienced pain and was forced to visit a hospital. She was immediately belittled and made to feel that she was merely a peasant who was experiencing a fit of nerves. The first doctor who examined Emilia pushed her aside. On a return visit, a specialist diagnosed her and concluded that she was of strong body type and would be able to reproduce well into her forties. “You can have another ten babies, at thirty-three years old; you can have another ten, until you are forty years old,” the doctor informed her. Emilia, enraged with a fury that revealed her awareness of her own inner desires to move beyond her social constraints, exclaimed, “As if! Like some kind of rabbit. What did he take me for? And what good would that do me anyhow?” (p. 136). This retort reveals that the traditional role of motherhood was coming unraveled as women savored the tastes of a global society. No longer would women succumb to the pressures and ide-

ologies of the fascist state. Bearing children solely to please another was declining. Emilia, like other women of her time, was no longer confined to the cultural roots of her ancestors. These modern women were becoming part of a new modern world, made up of broader global influences.

Inspired by a war that brought soldiers and influences from abroad, rural Tuscan women were forever changed. Bomb blasts, Nazi soldiers taking cover in their homes and barns, and the constant fear of punishment for radical thinking influenced the decision-making processes of men and women alike. But women yearned for control, and found it by denying *il Duce* children. "For a woman in particular, having a say in her pregnancies represented control over her own body, still considered one of the most important measures of gender equality" (p. 181).

As women emerged from the shadows of rural Tuscany in a postwar society, the global sphere was cracking open. "The shift from a generation of producers to one of consumers was dramatic and hard to fathom," notes Krause (p. 146). However, Italian women and Italian motherhood continued to bear the burden of a culture and society that still resonates with an echo of taboo regarding the question of reproduction. Even today, young women refuse to reproduce in high numbers. The matter of "Italy's culture of responsibility" contributes to the idea of motherhood and reproduction expectations (p. 191).

Krause's writing is methodical and skillfully clear. Her pleasant tones and illuminating anecdotes provide insight into the thoughts, feelings, and emotionally charged situations experienced by women considered to be simple peasants. Rural Italian women, often marginalized throughout history as the lesser class and considered ignorant to modern social mores, were more astute and aware than they are credited. The birthing campaign urged and encouraged women to stand against a government entity taking charge of their bodies. They revolted against the masculine ideal

of forced births and took a stance against the misogyny espoused by fascism.

Krause's work is, as she succinctly concludes, "a story about the unraveling of old obligations and the creation of new worlds--worlds in which having fewer, well-nurtured children made perfect sense" (p. 230). Her examination of how Italian women, in particular those of the peasant class, became part of a globalized world under the rule of *il Duce*, is a fascinating and descriptive story. Krause's research focuses on exposing "family ruptures and the larger journey of becoming modern. The turn to small families became an outward sign of being current and up to date" (p. 239). The story, carefully crafted by Krause encapsulates a myriad of intriguing twists and turns, culminating in a tightly woven work of art. Krause manages to skillfully unravel a people without history and recounts their lives in a narrative that incorporates all aspects of a social, cultural, and political revolution that is nothing but quiet.

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