

The Global Battle of Wheat: Mobilizing Science for Agrarian Development in Fascist Italy, 1920s-1940s

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In July 1925, the Italian fascist regime launched the “Battle of Wheat”. In the words of Mussolini, the goal of the Battle of Wheat was to “free the Italian people from the slavery of foreign bread”. An economic slavery, which bound Italy to import more than one third of its wheat requirements. Wheat flour was needed to make bread and pasta, the two main staples of the Italian population. Wheat farming was widespread throughout Italy, yet it could not keep pace with rising consumption levels since the end of World War I. The Battle of Wheat was meant to reverse this trend. From the mid-1920s until the end of World War II, the diktat of “wheat autarky”—raising internal wheat production to self-sufficiency levels—constituted one of the core ideological and economic tenets of the Italian fascist regime. In practice, the Battle of Wheat consisted of a set of economic incentives, social policies, and technological inputs aiming to expand and above all improve Italian wheat farming. It included the large-scale introduction of high-yielding and disease-resistant cultivars, fertilizers, pesticides, and agricultural mechanization, in conjunction with better land management practices, land reclamation, and land reform. As such, the Battle of Wheat constituted a vast program of agrarian development that ushered in the mass intervention of agrarian science and expertise into the Italian countryside, in a scale unprecedented not only in Italy, but in all of Europe. In fact, such mobilization of Italian agrarian science soon reverberated outside national boundaries. Upheld by a trans-national network of wheat scientists, the Battle of Wheat became a global model of agrarian development, spanning across authoritarian and liberal regimes, metropolises and colonies.

Taking the Battle of Wheat as the main case study, my project sets out to investigate the role of agrarian science in designing the development of Italy’s agriculture and natural environment during fascist rule. How did agrarian scientists such as ecologists, plant pathologists, plant breeders, and agronomists conceptualize and act upon the conditions of wheat farming in fascist Italy? And in doing so, how did they relate to the global emergence of wheat science over the first half of the 20th century, from the re-discovery of Mendelian genetics to the onset of the Green Revolution? These issues will be addressed by combining local with global scales of analysis. To this end, the project will follow the multiple trajectories of the wheat seeds at the heart of the Battle of Wheat, focusing in particular on the scientific expertise associated with their local diffusion and global circulation. Taking seeds as “framing devices” will allow to shed new light on the relationship between agrarian experts, farmers, and local environments “on the ground,” from the semi-arid and “underdeveloped” Mezzogiorno to “remote” Alpine regions. Through this perspective, the project will examine the interplay between “modern” technological inputs and customary farming techniques, as well as the close interaction between human practices of development and environmental factors such as climates, soils, and plant diseases. Moreover, the project will delve into how the issues emerging from the introduction, reception, and adaptation of new wheat cultivars at the local level are connected with the trans-national circulation of ideas, practices, and technologies about wheat breeding and the fight against wheat diseases. Drawing on a multitude of hitherto unexplored archival materials, the project will allow to present the Battle of Wheat as a rich case study to observe the global ramifications and local impacts of agrarian science and development in the inter-war years. Located at the intersection of environmental history, the history of development, and Science & Technology Studies, the project will thus contribute to opening up the history of fascism and fascist science to new frameworks of analysis, beyond narrow geographical and methodological boundaries.