

Daniela Manetti, *La Rinascente nell'Italia che cambia. Grandi magazzini e società 1968-1989*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2022, pp. 267.

The fascinating book by Daniela Manetti retraces a crucial period in the history of Italy, observing the changes taking place in the country from 1968 to 1989 from the perspective of department stores and companies “against the background of Italian historical and social evolution” (p. 14). The goal of the author is to analyse the history of “La Rinascente” company, reconstructing the methods through which the department store was transformed to “keep up with the profound changes” of Italy in the seventies and eighties (p. 13).

The success of “La Rinascente” was achieved through a process characterized by a propensity to anticipate social and economic changes in the country and through “shrewd corporate guidelines” (p. 13). Therefore, the author examined the implications of key issues such as shelf layout, the introduction of part-time work of shop assistants (p. 21), and the spread of the productivity bonus (p. 200). These innovations in the department store sector are linked “to the issues of organizing spaces in modern large-scale distribution and to those of managing union relations” for a specific group of employees, i.e. women, who

had specific needs in a country where they started to define their own role (p. 21). In the first case, the author explains the ways in which the department store passes from a single defined layout to a functional layout for the respective channel, “because the new styles have invested the different commercial typologies”, from the various types of supermarket to the discount and large warehouse (p. 189), bringing the number of sales formats to eight with the aim of “hunting down the single consumer” (p. 217). The importance of the introduction of part-time work, or in some cases “half-time” in the seventies, was explained by the issue of the reorganization of work, as the objective of the company was “to reduce the total number of working hours of employees without resorting (or by doing so in a limited way) to more drastic measures, such as dismissal, which would have led to even more decisive opposition from the trade unions” (pp. 78-79). In fact, recourse to dismissal would have led to an even more decisive opposition from the unions.

The volume is configured as a mature study, and as the result of a lasting and thoughtful analysis, accompanied by careful archival research and an equally scrupulous review of the secondary literature. The latter represents the most commendable part of the work, because the author has enhanced the work by consulting a large number of studies. As far as archival sources are concerned, however, the work was based on the analysis of the company deeds relating to the years between 1967 and 1990, kept in the Historical Archive of the Milan Chamber of Commerce, and on a complex work of reconstruction of the archives of “La Rinascente”. In fact, this company does not have an archive due to the vicissitudes that characterized the history of department stores.

In 1918 there was a fire, then, in 1943 the company archives were lost in the bombings and, finally, the fate of the company’s papers was strongly influenced by the succession of different properties (p. 13). Due to the difficulties encountered in accessing sources, in 2015 “La Rinascente”, launched a project called “La Rinascente Archives” intended to reconstruct the company documentation that were lost over time: the result of this work has made a vast documentation available to all scholars (p. 219).

The book is organized into five chapters plus conclusions. Of these, the first two represent an introductory section in which fundamental questions are analysed in order to understand the subsequent passages of the volume: in the first chapter, the author explores the economic situation of Italy, its modernization and the development of the department store during the economic boom, i.e. in the Fifties and Sixties (pp. 23-38); in the second chapter Manetti raises the problem of the

criticism of the consumer society and the methods of adaptation of the department store with regard to the spread of mass consumption (pp. 39-51). The analysis of the period covered by this work begins from the next chapter which contains the analysis of the period on which the book is focused where the author takes up the greatest epochal changes that characterized 1968 and explores the dynamics in the corporate structures of "La Rinascente" at the end of the Sixties.

The volume finds its maximum expression in chapters 4 and 5. The author, in fact, accompanies us in the analysis of the transformations to which the company was subjected in the two decades characterized by tangible social, political and economic changes. Indeed, in the 1970s and 1980s, "La Rinascente" was forced to consider social figures who previously did not receive the attention they deserved: young people, children, women who did not identify themselves solely as housewives and mothers (p. 217). These working women – whose number was steadily increasing – claimed their rights, wanted to emancipate themselves, fought to have their own space in society and wanted to save time in household chores. "La Rinascente" had to intercept the desires of those women who intended to cultivate other interests, i.e. exploit their time for luxuries such as hobbies, body care and sport.

The purpose of Manetti, therefore, is "to understand the transformations of the department store following the changes that marked Italy in the period between two historical caesuras": the end of the 1960s, characterized by social upheavals and youth protests, and 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall (p. 14). The book follows "the interweaving and continuous overlapping of political, economic, cultural and social facts and processes" in a period of just two decades, in which Italy went from the economic miracle to the crisis of the seventies, which, as the author recalls, made everyone understand the problem of limited resources, and, again, of growth (p. 14). The period analysed was also upset by the "hopes and expectations" of 1968, "when everything seemed possible through the force of utopia", by the years characterized by violence, by politically motivated terrorism and by the armed struggle. The final point of the research is the year that predicts the birth of a new world order, convincing every one of the planetary triumphs of capitalism and democracy, as "the most promising economic-political system and as a sort of definitive chapter in history" (p. 14).

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