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Writing Feminism on the Crossroads Between England and Italy
The Case of Lucy Re Bartlett (1876–1922)

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ABSTRACT
This essay focuses on the life and work of Lucy Re Bartlett (1876-1922), an activist, philosopher, and writer who played an active role in the socio-political debates surrounding women's rights and their place in society. As a member of the Women's Social and Political Union, Re Bartlett was aligned with the more radical wing of the suffrage movement and promoted the militant tactics employed by English suffragettes, which she thoroughly analysed in her writings. After relocating to Italy, she soon established a connection with one of the country's most influential editors of the time, Sofia Bisi Albini (1856-1919). The women's periodical press became a vital platform for the dissemination of her progressive theories in Italy. This article aims to illustrate how Lucy Re Bartlett's often controversial ideas intersected with and responded to Italian cultural and political dynamics, contributing to the development of a new progressive vision of femininity, motherhood, and the broader role of women in society. Finally, it analyses the impact of the First World War on her journalistic output and how the conflict gave added impetus to her revolutionary work.

Keywords
Lucy Re Bartlett, feminism, womanhood, periodical press, First World War

Introduction[1]

Lucy Re Bartlett (1876–1922) is without a doubt one of the most intriguing figures of the early twentieth-century women's movement who still needs to be rediscovered. Indeed, in recent years she has been defined as 'one of the most interesting voices' of a changing women's world, whose pioneering work has been largely forgotten or overlooked by both scholars and the general public.[2]

To tackle the innovativeness of Re Bartlett's work, it is important to explore her background story, before delving into her political endeavours and social activism. Unfortunately, previous attempts to reconstruct her biographical profile as well as the transnational intellectual networks in which she participated have only been partially successful. As Liviana Gazzetta points out, the incompleteness of her personal biography remains one of the major challenges for scholars who wish to fully understand her life, work and legacy.[3]

The few remaining biographical sources maintain that Lucy Bartlett was born in 1876 to an American mother and Scottish father. According to the British newspaper *The Times*, she 'combined in rare degree the logical outlook of the Scot with the open-mindedness and fearlessness of the American woman'.[4] It is fair to describe Lucy Bartlett as a global citizen, since she extensively travelled the world, starting from the United States, where she visited major cities such as Boston, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Indianapolis. Her curiosity and desire for knowledge eventually brought her to India, where she studied philosophy and developed a close friendship with the British activist and theosophist Annie Besant (1847–1933).[5]

Like Besant, with whom she shared a keen interest in philosophy, spirituality and politics, Lucy Re Bartlett became an ardent women's rights activist who, as a member of the Women's Social and Political Union [WSPU], supported the militant side of the suffrage movement. However, as Maurice Vanstone has noted, 'describing Lucy Re Bartlett […] simply as a feminist is to underrate her multi-dimensional talents and interests'.[6] Indeed, over the years she gained international recognition for her groundbreaking research on the causes of and remedies for juvenile delinquency, a field in which she had acquired thorough knowledge. This was also the case in Italy, where her expertise was rewarded with an honorary membership of the Società italiana di sociologia [Italian Society of Sociology].[7]

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that Re Bartlett, who had always had a keen interest in spiritual matters and women's social identity, was closely involved with the Theosophical Society and maintained close friendships with several of its

[1] This work was supported by the Research Foundation − Flanders (FWO) under grant no. 1132722n and is part of the project 'National Angels, Homefront Warriors and Wounded Doves of Peace. The Rhetorical Construction of Female Identity in Women's Literary Writings of the Great War in Italy (1914-1919)'.

[2] L. Gazzetta, 'Femminismo e spiritualità. La proposta di Lucy Bartlett', in: L. Re Bartlett, *Il femminismo nella luce dello spirito*, Florence, Edizioni Nerbini, 2018, p. 9.

[3] Ivi, p. 11.

[4] 'Obituary of Lucy Re Bartlett', *The Times* (May 1st, 1922).

[5] For an overview of her life and work, see A. Taylor, 'Besant, [née Wood], Annie (1847–1933), Theosophist and Politician in India', in: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30735 (accessed July 17, 2024); A. Taylor, *Annie Besant. A Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992; A.H. Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961; A.H. Nethercot, *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963.

[6] M. Vanstone, 'The Engineer, the Educationalist and the Feminist Writer. National Champions and the Development of Probation in Europe', in: *European Journal of Probation*, volume 1, 2 (2009), pp. 89-96 (p. 92).

[7] Other (honorary) memberships to international organisations included The Howard Association (founded in 1866 but known since 1921 as The Howard League for Penal Reform) and La Société de la Suisse pour la Réforme penitentiary.

members, most importantly with the aforementioned Annie Besant.[8] Even though a thorough analysis of this defining factor in her life requires a separate, in-depth study and thus goes beyond the scope of this essay, one should keep this aspect in mind when reading her essays, since it undeniably influenced her revolutionary ideas.

Although her pioneering work for young delinquents, as well as her involvement in Theosophical circles have been mostly forgotten, she is still being remembered today for a series of controversial essays on the female condition that she published in the early 1910s: *The Coming Order* (1911), *Sex and Sanctity* (1912) and *Towards Liberty* (1913). The publication of these works, which were originally intended for her English-speaking audience, immediately caught the attention of a broad public, both at a national and international level, and were translated into French and Italian shortly afterwards.[9]

Using these essays as a starting point, the focus of this article will be on Lucy Re Bartlett's success and reception in Italy. Its primary objective is to illustrate how Re Bartlett's feminist theories interacted with the Italian socio-cultural context of the early twentieth century. More specifically, this essay will analyse how Re Bartlett, with the help of her extensive intellectual and international network, turned to the periodical press in order to introduce Italian women to her progressive view on the concepts of motherhood and femininity as a whole. I will argue that once Lucy Bartlett moved to Italy, she took on a mediating role between English and Italian cultures, determined as she was to introduce her cutting-edge feminist theories into a patriarchal society where a large majority of the population was still resistant to the idea of social change and where only a small group of women had started questioning prevailing gender roles and women's position in society.[10] By doing so, I will analyse the strategies that she adopted to disseminate her progressive ideas in Italy, which have not yet been the subject of scholarly attention. Finally, the last part of this article will be dedicated to the analysis of a new and potentially universal ideal of femininity that Re Bartlett propagated in her works and how the context of the First World War gave added impetus to her revolutionary discourse.

From England to Italy

In 1904, upon graduation, Lucy Bartlett moved to Italy. When she married the Italian lawyer Emilio Re (1881–1967) in 1910, she adopted a double surname and decided to establish herself permanently in the country, but without ever losing interest in the cause of the WSPU, the suffrage movement, and the fight for women's rights in general. Indeed, in 1919 she wrote: 'Per quanto il destino da qualche anno mi abbia tenuta materialmente lontana dall'Inghilterra, sono rimasta sempre nel cuore del suo

[8] Annie Besant was not only a devoted follower but also an important theorist of theosophy. She published extensively on the subject, with some of her works including: *The Ancient wisdom. An Outline of Theosophical Teachings*, Adyar, Madras, India, 1897; *Why I became a Theosophist*, New York, The Path Office, 1890; *L'intimo proposito della Società Teosofica*, Rome, Tipografia Enrico Voghera, 1901; *Theosophy and the New Psychology*, London, Benares, Theosophical Publishing Society, 1904.

[9] Re Bartlett's first essay, *The Coming Order* was translated from English to French by Marie Cimbro-Bonnet and subsequently published under the title *Le Règne à venir. L'aurore d'une humanité nouvelle*, Torre Pellice Impr. Alpine, 1920.

[10] On the origins and history of Italian feminism and the women's movement, see, at least: L. Gazzetta, *Orizzonti nuovi. Storia del primo femminismo in Italia (1865-1925)*, Rome, Viella, 2018; A. Buttafuoco, *Cronache femminili. Temi e momenti dell'emancipazionismo in Italia dall'unità al fascismo*, Arezzo-Siena, Dipartimento di studi storico-sociali e filosofici, 1988; F. Pieroni Bortolotti, *Femminismo e socialismo dal 1900 al primo dopoguerra*, Messina-Florence, G. D'Anna, 1969; A. Rossi-Doria, *Il primo femminismo (1791-1834)*, Milan, Unicopli, 1993.

movimento femminile' ['Although fate has kept me physically away from England for a few years now, I have always remained at the heart of its women's movement'].[11]

After moving to Italy, it soon became clear that Re Bartlett was determined to continue her social activism in her new homeland, which she reportedly considered 'provincial' and 'slow'.[12] From the very beginning, she must have been aware of the fact that it would require a specific and more cautious approach to introduce – as we will see – sometimes radical and unconventional ideas to her new audience. But what is even more interesting for the purpose of this article is that she decided not to publish her above-mentioned militant works in Italy in their entirety until 1917, when the country was still embroiled in the Great War. Before that, Lucy Re Bartlett started circulating short excerpts of her work in Italian periodicals. For example, in 1911 she published a first translated chapter of *The Coming Order*, titled 'La Donna' ['Woman'], in *Rassegna Contemporanea*.[13] That same year, in February, she published a second chapter of that same volume, titled 'La posizione della donna' ['The position of woman'] in *Vita Femminile Italiana* [*Italian Women's Life*].[14] In September 1917, upon the publication of the entire volume, translated as *Il Regno che viene* in Italian, *La Nostra Rivista Femminile* [*Our Women's Magazine*][15] published the exact same chapter to honour Lucy Re Bartlett's achievement. These were both women's periodicals that were founded and directed by writer and journalist Sofia Bisi Albini (1856-1919).

I argue that Re Bartlett chose these two women's magazines as a forum for her activism on Italian territory because both Bisi Albini and Re Bartlett were members of the 'Lyceum', a women's club that allowed its female and mostly upper-class members to exchange ideas, discuss relevant topics, attend conferences and deepen their knowledge about various disciplines such as art, literature, education, politics, law and sociology.[16] Moreover, both women were also connected to the Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane (CNDI) [National Council of Italian Women], the Italian branch of the International Council of Women,[17] and participated as speakers in the first and only

[11] L. Re Bartlett, 'Il nuovo orientamento della donna nella vita familiare sociale e politica', in: G. Franciosi (ed.), *La donna e il suo nuovo cammino*, Rome, Lyceum Romano, 1919, p. 123.
[12] Gazzetta, 'Femminismo e spiritualità', cit., p. 24.
[13] *Rassegna Contemporanea* was founded in Rome in 1908 by Giovanni Antonio Colonna di Cesarò and Vincenzo Picardi, who also directed the periodical until it ceased publication in 1915.
[14] *Vita Femminile Italiana* (1907-1913) was a monthly illustrated magazine directed by the Italian writer and journalist Sofia Bisi Albini (1856-1919). Published by the small publishing house of Giuseppe Bertolotti, located near Lake Maggiore, the magazine covered a wide range of topics related to women's lives, including social initiatives, politics, education and literature.
[15] *La Nostra Rivista Femminile* (1914-1917) the third and last women's magazine founded and directed by Sofia Bisi Albini. Founded in 1914 and published by Riccardo Quintieri Editore in Milan, it had the difficult task of replacing *Vita Femminile Italiana* (1907-1913) and the long-lived *Rivista per le signorine* (1894-1913), two magazines that were very loved by their female readers. During the First World War, the magazine became the official voice of the Lega Nazionale delle Seminatrici di Coraggio [Official League of the Sowers of Courage], an all-female non-profit organisation that provided both material and moral support to women all over Italy. In the last issue of 1917, Bisi Albini announced the renewal and modernisation of *La Nostra Rivista Femminile*, even though the 1918 volume unfortunately never saw the daylight. The ceasing of *La Nostra Rivista Femminile*'s publication can most probably be attributed to the deteriorating health of editor-in-chief Sofia Bisi Albini, who died on the 17 July 1919.
[16] Sofia Bisi Albini was a member of the *Lyceum di Roma* and later of the *Lyceum di Milano*, where she served as director of the Literature Section. (See S. Bisi Albini, 'I Lyceum. La risposta', in: *La Nostra Rivista Femminile* 4, 2, p. 130). Lucy Re Bartlett was closely involved with the *Lyceum di Roma*, where she held multiple conferences.
[17] The International Council of Women (ICW) was established in Washington in 1888. The Italian division, with headquarters in Rome, was founded a few years later, in 1903. For a detailed history of the ICW, see E. Gubin & L. Van Molle, *Women Changing the World. A History of the International Council of Women*, Brussels, Editions Racine, 2005; and L.J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women. The Making of an International Women's Movement*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998.

conference of the Italian council that took place in Rome in April 1908.[18] In addition, through the years, as editor of multiple successful women's magazines, Sofia Bisi Albini had retained a consistent but also critical readership of educated women who constituted the perfect target audience for Re Bartlett's feminist discourse.

Apart from the social and intellectual network Re Bartlett and Bisi Albini were both part of, *La Nostra Rivista Femminile*'s purpose aligned surprisingly well with Re Bartlett's intellectual and militant agenda. Given the complex and multifaceted character of her often controversial opinions, Lucy Re Bartlett was clearly in search of an intellectual, open-minded female audience. Even though *La Nostra Rivista Femminile* consistently adopted a moderate approach, the magazine was open to innovative ideas and embraced the concept of socio-cultural change.

As a result, it regularly published articles exploring new initiatives and perspectives on women's role and position within society and did not hesitate to challenge the status quo. The editors actively stimulated intellectual and socio-cultural debate among its readers and contributors, determined to be a forum for the most refined and eloquent voices of the moment, a commitment that is also reflected in its mission statement. Indeed, in the magazine's very first editorial, the journal board stated that 'intorno a *La Nostra Rivista* oggi si raccoglie quanto di più elevato, di più colto e operoso conta il mondo femminile italiano' ['around *La Nostra Rivista* today gathers the most elevated, cultured, and industrious that the community of Italian women has in store'].[19]

Furthermore, the magazine dedicated substantial coverage to socio-cultural and political initiatives led by women, both in Italy and abroad, particularly through the columns 'Quello che si fa in Italia' ['What is done in Italy'] and 'Quello che si fa altrove' ['What is done elsewhere']. The emphasis on women's vital contribution to society and the well-being of the entire nation only grew stronger during the First World War. In this context, *La Nostra Rivista Femminile* has also been described by Emma Schiavon as 'un osservatorio fra i più significativi per cogliere l'evoluzione dell'idea di nazione nell'opinione pubblica femminile borghese fra lo scoppio del conflitto mondiale e il dopoguerra' ['one of the most significant observatories for understanding the evolution of the concept of nationhood within bourgeois women's public opinion between the outbreak of the global conflict and the post-war period'].[20] In brief, *La Nostra Rivista Femminile* was a women's magazine that encouraged critical reflection and the exchange of ideas. It raised awareness about and showed great sensitivity to the complex socio-cultural dynamics that characterised the years of its existence (1914-1917), and welcomed a diverse range of voices to its pages.

When Sofia Bisi Albini published 'The position of woman' in *La Nostra Rivista Femminile*, she also published her personal review of Re Bartlett's book, *Il Regno che viene*, in which she describes the author as 'una delle figure più salienti e più equilibrate del movimento femminile […] ispiratrice di opere m[e]ravigliose [e] di nobile spirito' ['one of the most salient and most balanced figures in the women's movement, […] the inspirer of marvellous works [and] of noble spirit'].[21]

[18] For more information about the CNDI and the relevance of its conference, see: A. Cova, 'Women, Religion and Associativism. The Aristrocratic Origins of the National Council of Italian Women, 1903-1908', in: *Women's History Review* 32, 2 (2023), pp. 209-227; D. Rossini, 'Il Consiglio nazionale delle donne italiane. Affinità e contrasti internazionali', in: S. Bartoloni (ed.), *La Grande Guerra delle italiane. Mobilitazioni, diritti, trasformazioni*, Rome, Viella, 2016, pp. 113-129; C. Frattini, *Il primo congresso delle donne, Roma 1908. Opinione pubblica e femminismo*, Rome, Biblink Editore, 2010.

[19] Editorial board of *La Nostra Rivista Femminile*, 'La nuova Rivista non poteva cominciare sotto più lieti auspici', *La Nostra Rivista Femminile* 1, 1 (January 1914), p. 2.

[20] E. Schiavon, *Interventiste nella Grande Guerra. Assistenza, propaganda, lotta per i diritti a Milano e in Italia (1911-1919)*, Florence, Le Monnier Università, 2015, p. 78.

[21] S. Bisi Albini, 'Il Regno che viene', *La Nostra Rivista Femminile* 4, 9 (September 1917), p. 648.

Notwithstanding the support of these most influential Italian women editors, who explicitly encouraged her female readers to buy and read the volume, Lucy Re Bartlett faced harsh criticism from both men and women. Criticism did not arrive unanticipated. In fact, in the preface of *Il Regno che viene*, Re Bartlett explicitly refers to the criticism she had already faced in the past, both in England and in Italy. However, the opposition to her progressive and often controversial beliefs did not affect her determination, nor did the objections raised by her opponents make her question her ideals or moderate her views. Instead, Re Bartlett decided to focus her energy on 'l'altra Italia, di fede e d'azione' ['the other Italy, of faith and action'],[22] that is to say, that part of the Italian public that was open to reform and did not by definition oppose socio-cultural and/or political change. Yet, as I will show in what follows, she adapted her communication strategies.

I believe that Re Bartlett faced a considerable challenge when she introduced her revolutionary ideas to her Italian audience, since she was internationally renowned for her outspoken opinions and predilection for direct action. For example, campaigning for women to get the right to vote in England, she propagated the boycott of marital life. The objective of these so-called 'sex strikes', to quote Tania Shew, was to 'win political rights by leveraging men's desires that women perform sexual acts, domestic chores and, most significantly, maternal duties'.[23] She adds that sex, marriage and birth strikes were part of a set of tactics adopted by the more radical members of the WSPU. Lucy Re Bartlett is one of the few women who exhaustively discusses this type of militancy in her work. Indeed, in *Sex and Sanctity*, Re Bartlett extensively elaborates on the concept of sex strike, or *silent* strike, as she refers to it in her work, as the expression of deep-seated discontent with the current state of things:

> In the hearts of many women to-day is rising a cry somewhat like this: "If I cannot *help*, at least I will not *acquiesce*. *I will know no man, and bear no child, until this apathy be broken through – these wrongs be righted!*" There are women both married and single who with differing degrees of consciousness, with varying intensity, are feeling thus, and acting thus to-day.[24]

Further in the book, she also addresses the critical voices of the time that attributed 'the increasing celibacy of women […] to degeneracy and dislike to motherhood', an opinion that she by no means shares.[25] Instead, Re Bartlett adds, these strikes are the expression of 'a newly awakened conscience' and 'they represent only a "strike" – a temporary protest – an appeal. They constitute woman's revolt, not against man, but against certain false social conditions which her soul has grown too large to let her any longer tolerate'.[26] In other words, these strikes are a way to denounce the continuing lack of political rights for women that can be attributed to persistent, yet outdated, social norms and deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs.

An important side note is that Re Bartlett's work was never adapted for the Italian public, so even the more controversial chapters in which she discusses the unconventional tactics of the silent strike were translated into Italian and published in

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[22] L. Re Bartlett, *Il Regno che viene*, Florence, Libreria della Voce, 1917, p. 1. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.
[23] T. Shew, 'Militancy in the Marital Sphere. Sex Strikes, Marriage Strikes and Birth Strikes as Militant Suffrage Tactics, 1911-14', in: A. Hughes-Johnson & L. Jenkins (eds.), *The Politics of Women's Suffrage. Local, National and International Dimensions*, London, University of London Press, 2021, (pp. 237-260) p. 238.
[24] L. Re Bartlett, *Sex and Sanctity*, London, Longmans, Green and co., 1912, pp. 25-26 (emphasis in the original text).
[25] Re Bartlett, *Sex and Sanctity*, cit., p. 26.
[26] Ibidem.

their unaltered form, despite the fierce criticism she had faced in the past. Yet, it is striking that she never elaborates on this form of militancy in Italian periodicals, where she appears to adopt a more moderate stance. Indeed, the chapters she does publish, namely 'La donna' ['Woman'] and 'La posizione della donna' ['The position of woman']), seem to be carefully selected for the magazine's readership in order to avoid any controversy.

I argue that she was aware of the fact that the radical approach to sex, marriage and birth striking adopted by the militant members of the WSPU was unlikely to succeed in Italy, where the sometimes violent actions of the suffragettes were already highly controversial. Both supporters and opponents of women's suffrage disapproved of their actions and did not hesitate to condemn the radical campaign with equally strong words. Matilde Serao (1856-1927) for example, a notorious critic of the British suffragettes, called Emmeline Pankhurst a 'zitella acida e furibonda' ['furious and embittered spinster'].[27] Yet, Serao certainly wasn't an isolated case. Another critical voice was Elena da Persico (1861-1948), who regularly expressed her disapproval of the 'suffragist madness'.[28] It goes without saying that if Re Bartlett wanted to be successful in disseminating her progressive views on womanhood in Italy, she needed to adopt a different strategy if she wished to engage with a broader audience. This more cautious approach is also reflected in her choice not to translate the title of *Sex and Sanctity* literally. For what is still considered to be her most controversial work, she opted for a more metaphorical title: *Il femminismo nella luce dello spirito* [*Feminism in the light of the spirit*] (1918).

This choice is an example of how Re Bartlett consciously adopts a mediating role between English feminist culture and the more moderate Italian one, a strategy that she maintains throughout her years as an activist in Italy. Another example is the way she takes up the defence of the suffragist movement. In 1918, during a conference speech for the Lyceum, she asked for the understanding of her Italian audience towards radical movements. She remembered that for more than forty years, British women had peacefully strived for women's suffrage, without obtaining satisfying results. Only when this strategy proved to be unsuccessful, stated Re Bartlett, did they decide to adopt more radical campaigns. She illustrated her point by comparing the criticism of more conservative women to the ignorance of an innocent child:

> And especially when the criticism comes from a woman who has never known anything but family life, safe and easy, I must tell you that it gives me the impression that it would give everyone if, in front of a soldier who had returned from the battlefield today, an oblivious child – innocent by the way – stopped and looked at the furrowed face and exclaimed: "I don't have these ugly marks". [...] We would immediately put our hand over that child's mouth, for it would still be a soldier we have before us, one who had returned from the front – who had suffered for us – and spent his life so that ours might improve![29]

Taking into account that these words were first pronounced during a conference of the Lyceum in 1918, so near the end of the war, we must acknowledge Re Bartlett's daring

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[27] M. Serao, 'Che faranno, dopo?' in: *Parla una donna. Diario femminile di guerra (maggio 1915-marzo 1916)*, Milan, Fratelli Treves Editori, 1916, p. 232.
[28] E. da Persico, 'Lucie Felix Faure Goyau', *Azione Muliebre* XV, 1 (8 January 1915), p. 10.
[29] 'E specialmente poi quando la critica parte da una donna che non ha mai conosciuto altro che la vita della famiglia, protetta e facile, devo dirvi che mi fa un po' l'impressione che farebbe a tutti se, davanti ad un soldato tornatoci oggi dal campo, si fermasse un bambino inconsapevole – innocente del resto – che, guardando il viso solcato, esclamasse : "Questi brutti segni io non li ho". […] metteremmo subito una mano sulla bocca di quel bambino, perché sarebbe sempre un soldato che avremmo dinanzi, uno tornato dal campo – che aveva sofferto per noi – speso la vita sua, perché la nostra aumentasse!'. Re Bartlett, 'Il nuovo orientamento della donna', cit., pp. 110-111.

choice to compare the normalised and socially acclaimed violence displayed by soldiers to the suffragettes' radical campaign. In Re Bartlett's view, both soldiers and women share a common and higher goal, since they were all fighting for liberty and justice. Therefore, she is convinced that 'the spirit of militancy [of the suffragettes] is something which requires to be understood and reverenced, whatever reserves society may permit itself to make regarding certain forms of expression chosen'.[30] She emphasises the fact that the suffragettes are pioneers who set an example for the world by paving the way for social and political reform so that one day, Italian women, too, will benefit from their efforts. It is striking to see that in order to gain the favour of her audience, Re Bartlett even distanced herself from the radical wing of the suffrage movement by saying that, although she approved of their tactics, she was never personally involved in militant actions:

> I am not here to make an apology for these militant women, to whose ranks I never personally belonged, but because of an impetus that transcends all feeling of sect and even nationality […] because it has always caused me great pain to hear these fighting women being criticized.[31]

Despite this declaration, historians today agree that she was, to quote Susan Kingsley Kent, 'an ardent enthusiast of militancy', and therefore, I argue that it is highly unlikely that she never participated in militant protests.[32]

The Creation of a New Ideal of Femininity and World War I

Lucy Re Bartlett's mission, both in Italy and abroad, extends beyond the defence of the suffragettes. From the very moment she started publishing her work, she seemed conscious of the new century's potential for change and evolution. Indeed, in the incipit of *The Coming Order*, she states that 'this is the age of woman − the age when woman's rights, woman's place, and woman's power are being more considered than in any previous epoch'.[33] This awareness is also reflected in her determination to change societal traditional views and values and to give rise to a whole new and potentially universal ideal of femininity. This ideal, as we will see, fits the emerging modern Italian society particularly well because the image of the new, modern woman that emerges from her writings is not as radical as some of the campaigns she supports, such as the 'silent strikes'.

For example, according to Re Bartlett, women should strive for social equality, but it should not be a woman's ambition to strive for gender equality. In *Sex and Sanctity*, she rejects the proposition that women are biologically and intellectually inferior to men, but at the same time she observes that it is not desirable that a woman becomes a female version of her male counterpart. Instead, Re Bartlett is convinced that a woman should embrace her unique qualities, just like men do. Acting differently, i.e., acting as a man, would imply that she renounces her female identity:

> Just as for man there are certain elementary duties of manhood, such as honour and courage, which come ahead of any special ties, so for woman there are the claims of pity, protection, and purity, which are inborn with her womanhood and which she may not silence if she is to be worthy of the name of woman.[34]

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[30] Re Bartlett, *Sex and Sanctity*, cit., p. 24.
[31] 'Io non sono qui per fare l'apologia di queste donne militanti, alle cui file non sono mai personalmente appartenuta, ma per un impeto che trascende ogni sentimento di setta e anche di nazionalità […] per quel sentimento mi ha recato sempre un gran dolore il sentire criticare queste donne battagliere'. Re Bartlett, 'Il nuovo orientamento della donna', cit., p. 110.
[32] S. Kingsley Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain, 1640-1990*, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 268.
[33] L. Re Bartlett, *The Coming Order*, London, Longmans, Green and co., 1911, p. 1.
[34] Re Bartlett, *Sex and Sanctity*, cit., p. 24.

As a result, she believes that a woman should find her soulmate in the literal sense of the word: men and women are different, yet complementary. They should embrace their differences and form a spiritual union: 'It is the new soul in woman crying out to a new soul in man – crying out to him to be her soul's mate as well as her body's mate – to fight shoulder to shoulder with her against the evil and the cruelty in the world'.[35] In this context, she revisits the Platonic myth of the origin of mankind as pairs of two, that were split apart and had to search for their other half. By revisiting this classical myth, she bypasses the positivist conviction – still dominant in the early 20th century – that women's biological inferiority had scientifically been proven and therefore could not be refuted.[36] In sum, starting from a strong belief in the distinction between the sexes, Re Bartlett highlights women's unique qualities and rejects their alleged inferiority, hence supporting, as Liviana Gazzetta states, 'the revolt against positivism'.[37]

Furthermore, Bartlett's progressive view on femininity did not necessarily exclude motherhood. An oft-repeated criticism at the time was that modern, emancipated women would no longer want to sacrifice their lives for the sake of a husband and children, although it was considered their primary task to ensure the survival of the species. Bartlett in turn argues that motherhood should be a conscious and deliberate choice, not an obligation or a mere attempt to meet society's expectations. In *The Coming Order*, she writes that, in her opinion, the ideal woman is a free woman who does not fear the judgement of others and, more importantly, is not limited by the constraints linked to or the prejudices against her gender. In her analysis of women's position within society, she states that motherhood and female emancipation do not exclude one another. On the contrary:

> The liberation of woman will not tend to diminish or to lower either marriage or maternity, but will rather give us mothers of a higher stamp. Mothers who will never have entered into marriage as a means of support but always from affection and free choice: who within the pale of marriage will possess also the dignity of freedom, so that the children born of them will be not children of the flesh alone, but children to whose creation they will have brought that co-operation of heart, and mind, and spirit.[38]

In that same context, Re Bartlett also explains that an educated woman with multiple and varied responsibilities both in and outside the domestic sphere, will experience a greater sense of fulfilment, which would only be beneficial for her husband and children. Such statements explain why Lucy Re Bartlett waited until 1917 to publish her books in Italian. Indeed, her ideal of the free, emancipated woman aligns with the idea of the war as a regenerating, purifying, and transformative experience that would put an end to a state of crisis and deterioration and would lead to the birth of the new man of the twentieth century. This concept was widely spread in Europe, and was particularly strong in Italy.[39] A thorough analysis of early-twentieth-century Italian women's magazines shows that they developed this concept applied to the female world, and thus believed that the Great War would lead to a radical break with the past and to the birth of the New Woman of the twentieth century. In one of her conferences, Lucy Re Bartlett observes that the Great War had permanently altered

[35] Ivi, p. 26.
[36] B. Montesi, 'Emancipazionismo femminile e legislazione a favore dell'infanzia traviata. L'opera di Lucy Bartlett in Italia', in: *Storia e problemi contemporanei* 24 (1999), pp. 153-174 (p. 153).
[37] Gazzetta, 'Femminismo e spiritualità', cit., p. 22.
[38] Re Bartlett, *The Coming Order*, cit., p. 16.
[39] See G. Berti, 'La Grande guerra e la crisi della civiltà europea. Riflessione del tempo' in: M. Isnenghi (ed.), *Pensare la nazione. Silvio Lanaro e l'Italia contemporanea*, Rome, Donzelli, 2012, pp. 93-110.

the relationship between men and women, both at a professional and domestic level, and calls it 'the dawn of a new era' for women.[40]

The conflict allowed innumerable Italian women to emerge from the shadows of the restrictive domestic sphere and to assume, often for the first time, public responsibilities. The women's emancipatory movement in Italy, which since the early twentieth century was progressively gaining momentum, had been working towards women's definitive and collective entry into the public sphere for years. However, before the Great War, there had been no real opportunity to facilitate the process. As a result of the duration of the conflict, women's involvement in public matters had now become inevitable. By taking the place of the men who joined the armed forces, women could finally prove themselves outside the domestic sphere and show that they too could make a valuable contribution to society.[41] In addition, Re Bartlett remarks in her writings that since the outbreak of World War I, men had come to realise that women's education was insufficient to face a conflict of this scale as well as its many challenges. Indeed, a woman had never been taught 'to not think exclusively of her loved ones', i.e., to put the interest of her country above her family. If 'such exclusivism was regarded as the most beautiful aspect of her femininity', wartime proves that women should be educated as citizens too.[42] This way, the conflict becomes a means to accelerate the advancement of the women's cause and to demand more civil, political and educational rights, including the right to vote.

In conclusion, it is worth noticing that Lucy Re Bartlett's Italian essays do not have an outspoken nationalist dimension, as opposed to the Italian women's magazines in which she also published. I believe this is a consequence of Re Bartlett's international background, of course, but also of the fact that, as previously mentioned, she was a loyal member of the Theosophical Society, a religious movement with an esoteric approach. The Society aspired to the formation of a 'universal brotherhood regardless of race, creed, sex, caste or colour', a principle that profoundly shaped its members' worldviews.[43] The emphasis on inclusivity and spiritual unity undeniably influenced Re Bartlett's feminist mission, aligning her advocacy for women's rights with the theosophical vision of transcending social and cultural divisions.

The Woman as Inspiring Force

As the previous paragraph demonstrates, the First World War played a crucial role in Re Bartlett's feminist mission on Italian territory, and she too believed that the conflict could possibly be decisive in women's pursuit of civic and political agency. However, the image of the free, modern woman that Re Bartlett tries to convey to her audience

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[40] Re Bartlett, 'Il nuovo orientamento della donna', cit., p. 103.

[41] For a detailed analysis of women's role during World War I and their contribution to the war effort both in Italy and abroad, see the work of, among others: S. Bartoloni, *Donne di fronte alla guerra. Pace, diritti e democrazia*, Rome, Laterza, 2017; M. Boneschi et al., *Donne nella Grande Guerra*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2014; A. Bravo, *Donne e uomini nelle guerre mondiali*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1991; G. Braybon & P. Summerfield, *Out of the Cage. Women's Experiences in the Two World Wars*, London, Routledge, 1987; S.R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, London, Routledge, 2002; L. Guidi, *Vivere la guerra. Percorsi biografici e ruoli di genere tra Risorgimento e primo conflitto mondiale*, Napoli, CLIO Press, 2007; A. Lamarra, 'Vivere e scrivere la guerra', in: *La Camera blu* 1 (2006), pp. 11-31; A. Molinari, *Donne e ruoli femminili nella Grande Guerra*, Milan, Selene Editore, 2008; A. Scardino Belzer, *Women and the Great War. Femininity under Fire in Italy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; E. Schiavon, *Dentro la guerra. Le italiane dal 1915-1918*, Florence, Le Monnier, 2018.

[42] 'A trovarsi incitata a non pensar più esclusivamente ai propri cari mentre fino a ieri tale esclusivismo era considerato come il più bel fiore della sua femminilità.' Re Bartlett, 'Il nuovo orientamento della donna', cit., p. 105.

[43] The Theosophical Society, 'Mission, Objects and Freedom', *The Theosophical Society*, <https://www.ts-adyar.org/mission-objects#:~:text=Its%20three%20Objects%20are%3A,the%20powers%20latent%20in%20man> (accessed July 17, 2024).

is not just that of an independent, educated woman who has acquired full political rights. In Re Bartlett's view, a woman's mission in life is to discover her true potential by adding a spiritual dimension to her earthly existence. Indeed, in her conference speech titled 'Il nuovo orientamento della donna nella vita familiare, sociale e politica' ['The new orientation of women in family, social and political life'], she argues that the ultimate goal of every woman should be to rise above herself and to fully develop her inspirational power, since this is what truly differentiates her from men.[44] As said, Re Bartlett emphasises that a woman should never aspire to becoming a mere imitation of men. Instead, she should focus on the development and refinement of those aspects that make her unique as a woman.

For example, one of these distinct characteristics is women's exceptionally well-developed intuition, a talent that, as she believes, can be attributed to a woman's closeness to nature. Drawing on the work of the influential German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann (1842-1906),[45] Re Bartlett argues that a woman has the power to protect mankind from 'all that is artificial' and therefore deviant or impure, since her existence is deeply rooted in nature by virtue of her pure and privileged role as a mother and creator of new life.[46] Still, it is crucial to remember that having children is not a precondition for women to unlock the spiritual dimension of life. On the contrary: a woman's belonging to the privileged sex that is blessed with the potentiality to bring children into this world is considered to be more than sufficient.

Furthermore, Re Bartlett explains that maternity can assume many different forms. Indeed, in her essays she does not only discuss 'physical maternity' but also 'social maternity' and 'spiritual maternity'. The latter is the ultimate consequence of a woman's unique 'creating and purifying force'.[47] According to Lucy Re Bartlett, 'spiritual maternity' is the result of a long and transformative process that is potentially as life-changing as giving birth. She does not go into much detail, yet she suggests that a woman who has entered the spiritual state of life is a woman who can think critically and display a greater sense of both moral and social awareness than other women. Moreover, Re Bartlett argues that having experienced spiritual maternity allows women to be better mothers even to her children. Social maternity, on the other hand, is the term she uses to refer to the decisive role that women play in the education of their children, through which they indirectly influence society. Indeed, the women of today are raising the citizens of tomorrow, and during their adult life these citizens will be guided by the norms and values that they have been taught by their mothers. Reflecting on the concept of social maternity is even more compelling in the context of the First World War, since women drew attention to the importance of their role in the upbringing of generations of young men who were bravely fighting on the front lines to protect the nation. By praising the strength and courage of these generations, women highlighted their invaluable contribution to the defence of the country's common good. Through this argument Lucy Re Bartlett linked her beliefs and social ideas about women's innate role to the national discourse on the First World War.

The three forms of maternity that Re Bartlett discusses in her work and conferences all share one common trait: the ultimate goal for the woman is to assume a guiding and inspirational role for her children, family, and society as a whole. At the same time, Re Bartlett acknowledges that this is anything but a simple task, and that

[44] This conference speech was originally written in Italian and was never translated into English or any other language.
[45] She explicitly refers to his most famous work, *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1884), originally published in 1869 under the title *Philosophie des Unbewussten*.
[46] Re Bartlett, 'Il nuovo orientamento della donna', cit., p. 114.
[47] Ivi, p. 122.

many women struggle to fully embrace their inspirational role. Nevertheless, in *The Coming Order*, she stresses that women should not feel limited by external factors, such as social restrictions or prejudices, since 'the great women of history', who often faced even more challenging situations, 'have always transcended circumstances'.[48] More specifically, she cites three famous examples of role models that immediately appeal to the imagination of her audience: Joan of Arc, Catherine of Siena and Dante Alighieri's Beatrice. Joan of Arc, whose heroic military actions earned her the title of Saviour of France, never let her fate be determined by her humble origins as a farmer's daughter or by societal expectations towards women. Similarly, if Catherine of Siena had given in to external pressure, she would never have intervened in political affairs, nor would she have taken on a mediating role that brought her to the Papal Court in Avignon, France. Yet, the most effective example to illustrate Lucy Re Bartlett's discourse is undoubtedly that of Beatrice. Indeed, as Dante Alighieri's personal guide, she accompanies him during his journey through the nine spheres of the *Paradiso*. Therefore, she is the ultimate example of a spiritual guide who most explicitly demonstrates women's inspirational force.

Consequently, Re Bartlett continues, the remarkable examples of these illustrious women show that the new generation of women should not blame society, or more specifically men, when they encounter obstacles while developing their spiritual power. In fact, she writes, 'it is error to believe that fundamentally it is man who has impeded, or impedes, woman's progress – in the deepest sense it is always woman herself'.[49] In other words, a woman unconsciously creates her own limits, which implies that she can also push her boundaries without the intervention of others. In order to do so, Re Bartlett is convinced that women need to free themselves from their own self-limiting beliefs. In the opening chapter of *The Coming Order*, she writes:

> It is when woman forgets herself – loses all sense of her womanhood and its possible limitations in an ideal which brooks no obstacle – it is then that she is most essentially a woman, and most womanly. For she is lifted above her bodily nature with all its weaknesses, and becomes a purely spiritual force – an inspiration.[50]

In this passage, Re Barlett offers her female readers the ultimate solution to their problems. Once a woman stops her flaws determining her life, she will be able to unlock her inspirational force and add a deeper, spiritual dimension to her life. These beliefs stand in contrast with another progressive view on womanhood expressed in 1917 on the pages of the influential women's magazine *La Donna – Rivista quindicinale illustrata* [*The Woman – Fortnightly illustrated magazine*] (1904–1968),[51] by one of its regular columnists, Jeannette. Jeannette publishes a series of articles in which she states that men are responsible for women's current predicament. In analysing women's position in society, Jeannette asks herself why Italian women do not enjoy

[48] Re Bartlett, *The Coming Order*, cit., p. 2.
[49] Ivi, p. 3.
[50] Ivi, p. 2.
[51] *La Donna – Rivista quindicinale illustrata* was founded in 1904 by journalist and marketeer Nino Giuseppe Caimi (1876-1952) as an illustrated supplement of two Italian newspapers, *La Stampa* (1867-present) and *La Tribuna* (1883-1946). The long-lived magazine covered a wide range of topics, from fashion and beauty to literature, (art) history and interior design. It went on to become one of Italy's most popular and widespread women's magazines of the early twentieth century. For more detailed information about the magazine, see: D. Alesi, '*La Donna*, 1904-1905. Un progetto giornalistico femminile del primo Novecento', in: *Italia Contemporanea* 222 (2001), pp. 43-63; B. Meazzi, '"Non sarà un giornale femminista?" *La Donna – Rivista quindicinale illustrata* (1905-1968)' in M.V. Hernández Álvarez (ed.), *Escritoras de la Modernidad (1880-1920)*, Granada, Editorial Comares, 201, pp. 123-130.

the same status as, for example, their French counterparts.[52] According to Jeannette, there is only one possible answer: men have been hindering women's development for decades, since they do not give them the recognition they deserve and consider them inferior. As a result, women still feel unequal to men and unappreciated both in and outside the family:

> In France, the woman is the centre of the universe, she has an importance in the family, in society, that she does not have elsewhere. [...] In Italy, on the other hand, we are far from having that importance; men may adore us, but they still consider us as inferior beings.[53]

In Jeannette's view, women are inhibited from fully developing their talents and therefore from becoming the best version of themselves. Unlike Lucy Re Bartlett, who argues that women create their own limits, Jeannette does put the blame on the male gender. The two different perspectives on the cause and origin of women's subordination demonstrate how lively and articulated the debate on the topic was. Lucy Re Bartlett contributed to this debate by launching a view on women's agency and self-empowerment that was ahead of its time. The idea that feminism is not about becoming a man or fighting against the man will resurface in the feminist debates of the second half of the century and is still topical.

Conclusive Remarks

As this article has shown, Lucy Re Bartlett's pioneering work as a writer and activist can be defined as multifaceted and is therefore difficult to categorise under one heading. Indeed, throughout her life and career she showed great social commitment and put to use her profound expertise in the philosophical, juridical and societal fields. Unfortunately, her groundbreaking research on the causes of juvenile delinquency as well as her cutting-edge feminist theories are mostly unknown to contemporary audiences. In an attempt to save Re Bartlett's legacy from oblivion, this essay has focused on her social activism and more specifically on the mediating role she took on between British feminism and Italian culture. As we have seen, this mediating role is best reflected in two strategic decisions. First of all, Re Bartlett did not compromise on her often unconventional theories and beliefs on womanhood, but she did adapt her communication strategies to Italian society's resistance to the feminist movement that at the time was still gaining momentum. Secondly, she waited until 1917 to fully publish her militant works and linked her feminist theories to the national discourse on the First World War. This way, she aligned her model of the emancipated woman with the myth of the war as a transformative and regenerative experience that could involve and be beneficial for women too. In this whole process, Re Bartlett could rely on the extensive intellectual network provided by the Italian female periodical press, which included prominent women editors such as Sofia Bisi Albini and allowed Re Bartlett to gradually introduce her feminist thoughts to a broad, female readership.

As shown, Lucy Re Bartlett aimed to create a new ideal of femininity that applied to all women and was therefore not limited to the British or Italian context. This universal model was progressive and revolutionary, but in a rather subtle way. While criticizing the downsides of a male-centred society, such as the lack of quality education and political rights for women, she never incited her readers to reject the

[52] Jeannette was one of the pseudonyms used by journalist Felicita Rey Ragazzoni. Even though little is known about her life, her biweekly column, *Consigli di bellezza e di toeletta* [*Beauty and grooming tips*] used to be one of the most read and anticipated columns of *La Donna – Rivista quindicinale illustrata*. Her beauty advice was always followed by *La corrispondenza di Jeannette* [*Jeannette's correspondence*], a sub-column where she answered the many questions her female readers sent her by mail.

[53] Jeannette, 'Pei giorni che viviamo (Consigli di bellezza e toeletta). Donne latine I', in: *La Donna – Rivista quindicinale illustrata* XIII, 296 (15 August 1917), p. 5.

traditional aspects of female identity. Instead, she encouraged women to embrace their unique qualities and to focus on the development of those talents that distinguish them from men. In Re Bartlett's view, if a woman brings this transformative process to a successful conclusion, she will be able to unlock the spiritual dimension of life and awaken her inspirational power. Reaching this stage should be every woman's ultimate goal, since she can deploy inspirational power to guide their loved ones and, by extension, the entire nation, just like Beatrice guided Dante during his journey through Paradise.