

Colonialism *and* National Identity



Edited by
Paolo Bertella Farnetti *and* Cecilia Dau Novelli

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, Italy's colonial past was a largely neglected topic in historical studies. Before then, only a handful of historians had shown any inclination for rescuing it from the dusty shelves of history, to which it had been relegated. With a few exceptions – most notably Angelo Del Boca – not many had the courage to venture into such treacherous territory.

Colonial studies experienced a resurgence at the start of the new millennium, with remarkable progress in the quantity and quality of research, along with the wider public's newfound interest, as evidenced by an important conference held in Milan in 2006 and the large audience it attracted.

This book addresses the relationship between national identity and colonial culture in Italy. The centrality of the construction of Otherness in the identity formation of the colonizer has been extensively reported, both in Europe and elsewhere, and the relevance of colonial heritage has also been attested. In Italy, however, this relationship has been neglected in existing historiography, and the colonial experience has traditionally been side-lined and marginalized.

This volume is divided into several sections, each organized around an underlying theme. Within each theme, a broad array of topics and methodologies reflect the authors' approach in analysing the role of colonialism in the process of Italian identity formation.

The rather heterogeneous works contained in this book, which attest the vitality and complexity of the debate on Italian colonialism, are clustered around one central theme: the reconstruction of un-comfortable memories, and a past that will not pass – which overlap the challenging present circumstances of rigidity, racism and rejection. As such, this book is a work of critical reflection, assembled using varied resources and scientific tools in order to shed light on a common past that is still so near and vivid in the minds of Italians, but at the same time so denied, distorted and forgotten in the collective memory.

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978-1-4438-8005-3

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INTRODUCTION

PAOLO BERTELLA FARNETTI
AND CECILIA DAU NOVELLI

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, Italy's colonial past was a largely neglected topic in historical studies. Before then, only a handful of historians had shown any inclination for rescuing it from the dusty shelves of history, to which it had been relegated. With a few exceptions—most notably Angelo Del Boca—not many had the courage to venture into such treacherous territory.

Colonial studies experienced a resurgence at the start of the new millennium, with a remarkable progress in the quantity and quality of research along with the wider public's new-found interest, as evidenced by an important conference held in Milan in 2006 and the large audience it attracted. A book published on the occasion of the conference presented the state of the art in the field of Italian colonial studies while at the same time hinting at the long road ahead.¹ All the more so as the 1980s and 1990s had witnessed a fundamental change in Italian historiography: time-honoured themes, such as political parties and social movements, lost ground in favour of a "new history" where behaviours, identity, mentality, leisure time, squares and monuments, women, families and sports took centre stage, as the writing of history gradually shifted to a concern with virtually every human activity in the world of ordinary experience. It was also thanks to this renewal in research paradigms that the field of colonial studies was revived and invigorated by a fresh wave of younger historians seeking to open up "history from below" with a variety of new approaches, broadening its hitherto tight boundaries. Merging multiculturalism and multidisciplinary research in its renewed, distinctive hybridity, this lively and multi-faceted intellectual environment has given birth to a new historiography. Younger scholars' irreverence and lack of inhibition have led to studies on race and racism, colonialism and Italian identity,

¹Riccardo Bottoni, ed., *L'Impero fascista: Italia ed Etiopia, 1935-1941* [The fascist Empire: Italy and Ethiopia, 1935-1941] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008).

integration and exclusion, colonialism and post-colonialism, in a mixture of disciplines and methodologies. Results were not always consistent, but they are still signs of a renewed vitality, suggesting the willingness to disentangle the contradictions of a colonial past that was too often denied or dismissed by the collective conscience. Hence, colonial history expanded beyond the confines of academia and morphed into a borderland between anthropology, literature and sociology, receiving growing attention outside the specific discipline and even in the media.

This book addresses the relationship between national identity and colonial culture in Italy.

The centrality of the construction of Otherness in the identity formation of the colonizer has been extensively reported, both in Europe and elsewhere, and the relevance of colonial heritage has also been attested. In Italy, however, this relationship has been neglected in existing historiography, and the colonial experience has traditionally been sidelined and marginalized.

An honest analysis of Italy's colonial past, devoid of myths and misconceptions, is then crucial to understanding the dialectical construction of the country's collective identity, which is illegible until it emerges against the ground of Otherness.

For this reason, the historical frame of reference that underlies this work stretches from the Italian colonial rule to the Republican period. The central thesis of this book is that the Italian identity was fostered by a diverse set of consequent colonial narratives, and Italianness was thus defined in opposition to the Other. Even after the loss of the colonies, and despite lack of direct control over overseas territories—except for the Somali Trusteeship—these narratives were only partially challenged, and the colonial culture still exerted influence on the Italian society.

The implications on the way Italians perceived and expressed their national identity were enormous. At first, denial and self-acquittal prevailed. Consistent with the old saying "Italians, the good people", the general perception was that Italians had been "good colonizers", gave more than they took, and did not inflict violence upon the colonized. In the years following decolonization, it was replaced by the reassuring notion of a "teaching mission", in keeping with the belief that Italian workers had generously shared their skills and know-how with the locals. Finally, the immigrant rhetoric set in with its usual corollary of colonization as a creation of necessity. Many of these stereotypes have been debunked, but a lingering self-referential attitude prevails among Italians as to the uniqueness of their case, almost as if the peculiarities of their colonial history allowed them to plead guilty to a lesser degree. Unfortunately, this

led to a delay in acknowledging the issue and, what's more, to a missed opportunity for reflection on integration and racism, as if they were not, once again, our concern. Perhaps, as noted by Giampaolo Calchi Novati, because the end of Italian colonialism was an aftermath of WWII and not the result of a nationalist campaign for independence in its colonies. It was then a one-sided process, lacking confrontation and acknowledgement of the "Other". Recognition and respect for Otherness can only be attained through confrontation, but the loss of Italian colonies preceded the independence movements, thereby precluding respect and recognition of the colonized. Italy's anomalous loss of its colonies, following defeat in World War II, did not trigger an inquiry or a debate on the country's colonial past and its consequences.

Elsewhere in Europe, the conflict with the colonies struggling for independence from the colonial rule was extremely violent and resulted in questioning its history and its legitimacy: the confrontation between the colonized and the colonizer eventually led the latter to self-questioning. Consequently, other countries' sustained reflection on colonialism was one of the most discussed topics in recent historiography, triggering a parallel debate in the field. Starting in the 1960s with Frantz Fanon's work, the history of colonialism ceased focusing exclusively on economic and military issues and embraced cultural and post-colonial studies. No longer "only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" in Edward Said's meaningful words. Accordingly, colonialism was not just about economic exploitation, it was also a complex cultural endeavour, and an understanding of its cultural approach was crucial to its analysis. This evolution is clearly discernible in the introduction to *Quel che resta dell'Impero*, by Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes, where the Italian colonial culture is examined in depth.²

This volume is divided into several sections, each organized around an underlying theme. Within each theme, a broad array of topics and methodologies reflect the authors' approach in analysing the role of colonialism in the process of Italian identity formation.

The first section is titled "Historiography" and examines historiographical literature as the key to understanding the relationship between national history—with its established boundaries—and colonial

² V. Deplano and A. Pes, *Quel che resta dell'impero. La cultura coloniale degli italiani* [What is left of the empire. The Italian colonial culture] (Milan: Mimesis, 2014).

history, seen as the history of expansion and foreign policy. Historiography and sources are provided by scholars and by public archives.

Cecilia Dau Novelli starts with a review of Italian works published in the 1960s and 1970s when colonial history was still a matter for nostalgics only. Then she describes the rebirth of colonial studies in the 1980s and the role of younger, passionate researchers in the recent boom.

Alessandro Volterra provides a methodologically rigorous overview of the sources collected by the historical archives of the Ministry of Italian Africa, the Military tribunals, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Army General Staff Archive. In his valuable work, he does not refrain from exposing the damage caused by past mismanagement of the archives, which resulted in relocations, requisitions and even in the disappearance of important series of sources.

The second section, "Colonialism and the politics of teaching history", analyses education as the field where the idea of the nation takes shape and, at the same time, as the instrument establishing the canons through which the "Other" is viewed and defined.

In light of this, Gianluca Gabrielli's essay is an attempt at understanding how the Italian world view was affected. He starts with primary school textbooks in the newly established Kingdom of Italy—a time when the word race was still vague—then analyses racism as one of the central features of the fascist ideology, the loss of the colonies, and finally the vast post-1968 transformation. In her essay, Silvana Palma recalls the challenges met by the complex process of institutionalization of African Studies in Italian universities, revealing setbacks and patterns of thematic continuity with the colonial past. Only decolonization, and the emergence of independent African states allowed the birth of African history as an academic discipline and a revision of the traditional Eurocentric approach.

The "Role of colonial novels" is the subject of the third section. Aware that forms of cultural production like novels were a means of identity formation and a discursive laboratory in which various forms of "relations of domination" were experimented with, Gabriele Proglia analyses how these texts helped support colonial policies during the Liberal age and Fascism, and their contribution in spreading nation-ness and specific representations of "Otherness". Analysing some literary instances of the early-to mid-twentieth century, such as colonial novels written by Mario Dei Gaslini, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Guido Milanese, Proglia focuses on uncovering the underlying typologies of female subjection. The second essay, by Luciano Marrocu, focuses instead on cultural production and its different forms in the Republican age and analyses Ennio Flaiano's famous novel to assess the presence of patterns developed during the

colonial period and how these are presented by the author. Marrocu most lucidly remarks that this post-colonial novel provided a unique opportunity for reflection in an otherwise desolate scene, where denial was for a long time the preferred option. The novel's leading character is an anti-hero, he has blood on his hands, but he denies any responsibility for his action, akin to the attitude of Italians towards *their* colonialism.

The section titled "The scope and limits of post-colonial politics" focuses on the period after the Second World War. Alessandro Pes analyses the relationship between republican politics and colonialism from a discursive point of view to assess how political parties handled the colonial past and how they managed the transition to the post-colonial period. He focuses in particular on Alcide De Gasperi, leader of the Christian Democratic Party, who tried to defend Italians' right to complete their civilizing project in Africa. Antonio Morone examines the Somali Trusteeship through political relations between Italy and its former colonies, exploring new post-war practices, such as development cooperation, as a meeting ground for former colonizers and newly independent countries. Morone analyses Italy's return to Africa in 1950 with a new civilizing mission that ended in 1960 and entailed for the first time an actual process of decolonization. The author remarks how the mandate helped erase the past and create the legend of the "good Italians".

Across different chronological periods, two essays in the fifth section, titled "Race and Racism", analyse the role of race and racialization of the "Other" in strengthening, if not building, consciousness and racial unity among Italians. Giulia Barrera highlights the contrast between racism in colonial Eritrea—as evident in discourse and practice—and Hanna Gonnice Bolsi's story, an exceptionally unique case of integration, showing that, as an exception proving the discriminatory rule, its uniqueness comes across as an even more significant factor. Alessandro Triulzi analyses the incongruity between the official rejection of racism and persistent racist attitudes in Italy and its effects on relationships between Italians and those who are perceived as "Other". He does so by lending a voice to those who were previously condemned to silence, and therefore to oblivion.

Anti-colonialism is the subject of the sixth section, which focuses on the reception and dissemination of anti-colonial ideas in the years of decolonization. Valeria Deplano's work analyses the different positions on post-war anti-colonialism adopted by Italian political parties, quality newspapers and magazines. Deplano reviewed articles from *L'Europeo*, *Epoca* and *L'Espresso*—among others—where prominent journalists tried to report and explain the end of colonialism, some with annoyance, and

some showing empathy.

Memory is the subject of the last section, where colonial memories and their elaboration in the Republican age are observed from two different reference frames: Addis Ababa and Modena. On the one hand, Charles Burdett analyses how collective memories of colonialism are revised, passed on, and bequeathed in a former Italian colony. First, he examines some texts dating to the colonial period, from Graziani to Lessona, and then diaries and notebooks written by veterans upon their return from Africa. On the other hand, Paolo Bertella Farnetti investigates the cornerstones of collective colonial memory in small-town Italy and in the country as a whole. Providing an overview of private, public and community sources, Bertella Farnetti explains how memory needs not only to be retrieved but also shared with those we stole it from. All the more so, because Italy is still far from effectively acknowledging its colonial past, thus allowing for the possibility of shameful events such as the ugly Affile affair—and its shrine to fascist General Rodolfo Graziani, guilty of heinous crimes in Libya and Ethiopia—or an ebb and flow of arrogant racism and the defence of the indefensible. The rather heterogeneous works contained in this book, attesting to the vitality and complexity of the debate on Italian colonialism, are clustered around one central theme: the reconstruction of uncomfortable memories, and a past that will not pass—which overlap the challenging present circumstances of rigidity, racism and rejection. It is not, then, a traditional history book; rather it is a work of critical reflection, assembled using varied resources and scientific tools in order to shed light on a common past that is still so vivid and near in the minds of Italians, but at the same time so denied, distorted and forgotten in the collective memory.