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Italian Colonialism in the Making of National Consciousness: Representations of African Natives

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This paper proposes a critical investigation of the discursive constructions supporting the othering of the African native in both the liberal and Fascist phases of Italian colonialism. It focuses on the production of narratives describing African populations and investigates their participation in the crystallization of a self/other dichotomy, to frame the participation of colonialism in the development of the Italian national consciousness from the late 19th century onwards. The research addresses the experiences and comments of explorers, journalists, jurists and relevant personalities of the colonial administration to tackle what they thought of their African counterparts, and how they portrayed them to the Italian public. In particular, the paper recognizes the existence of a plurality of othering categories and stereotypes attributed to African populations and addresses their development and transformation alongside the socio-political transformation of Italian nationalism and Italian colonialism.

Introduction

In classic Durkheim's definition, a collective consciousness refers to "the set of shared beliefs, ideas, attitudes and knowledge that are common to a social group or society" (Durkheim 1960). A collective consciousness enables a society to learn to think of itself as a specific unity, which exists and survives on its own, constructing, dismantling and reconstructing the discursive borders of its identity.

The post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida famously argued that the definition of a self/other dichotomy is a fundamental element in the construction of a collective consciousness (Derrida 1982). This differentialist logic finds no better space of exploration than the colonial condition.

The correlation between colonial experience and national consciousness received much attention in post-colonial studies, particularly regarding how the encounter between colonised and colonisers inevitably affected the subsequent evolution of singular nations, people and social imaginaries (e.g. William 1994; Doty 1996; Young 2001; Duara 2004; Diez 2005; Nicolaïdis, Sèbe, Maas 2014). Among the many works on the colonial condition, the famous Fanonian characterisation of the colony as a “Manichean” and “compartmentalised” world (Fanon 1961) was particularly relevant in exposing the manifest and transparent development of specific roles and spaces for action, which carefully divided the colonial “self” from the colonized “other”.

In recent times, post-colonial migration, security/integration dilemmas and the development of new forms of nationalist-based racism, also inspired a generation of de-colonial scholarship engaged with the study of permanent hierarchies among subjectivities in post-colonial societies (Mbembe 2011; Mignolo 2017; Rodriguez 2018; Dabashi 2019). However, in both post-colonial and de-colonial approaches, the discussion on Italian colonialism remained highly marginalised.

Although from the 1970s onwards, a substantial historical reflection has been carried out on the character and implications of the Italian presence in Africa (Del Boca 1976; 1989; 2005; Mieke 1976; Rochat 1973; Zaghi 1973; Labanca 1993; 2002), the historiographic delay in the analysis of Italian colonialism was accompanied by the prolonged marginalisation of post-colonial studies in the country’s intellectual circles. As noted by Mellino, “The result is that even in academia, the prevailing attitude among Italian scholars seems to consider post-colo-

nialism as a field that may be fascinating but is really concerned almost exclusively with the history of others”¹ (Mellino 2012).

From the late 1980s onwards, a new generation of critical scholars introduced post-colonial studies to Italian universities. This contributed to bridge the critical tradition in Italian historiography and social studies to post-colonialism, connecting the memory of colonialism to the contemporary analysis of massive migration, structural racism, and racialized work exploitation (Triulzi 2008; Mellino 2012; Dirar 2013; Mezzadra 2015; Proglione 2011). At the same time, a critical investigation on discursive and anthropological practices (Tabet 1997; Sòrgoni 2001; Lenci 2004a; Palma 2008; Calchi Novati 2011; Morone 2010) has also been undertaken specifically concerning the implicit or explicit adoption of race and blackness as master signifiers in past and present Italian public discourse.

Nonetheless, though much work was carried out on Italians’ action and influence on African subjects, less has been said concerning how a particular imagination of Africa and of Africans contributed to shape the Italian national consciousness.

Not differently from other colonising societies, Italians learned to think of themselves as part of a differentialist social schematisation, confining their identities and the one of their colonial others in dichotomised and extremely simplified categories: good and evil, harmony and chaos, and eventually, black and white.

In both the liberal and the Fascist phases of Italian colonialism, the discursive construction of a colonial other represented a fundamental asset to legitimise Italian action as the expression of the moral responsibility to save the African from himself and the patriotic duty to dominate him. These elements inevitably took part of the maturation of the collective consciousness of the Italian nation.

¹ All the extracts are translated from Italian to English by the author unless otherwise indicated.

This paper proposes a discursive reflection on the systematised construction of othering narratives charactering the African natives in Italian late 19th and early 20th century public discourse to expose the participation of the colonial experience in the evolution of the Italian collective consciousness. It investigates the crystallisation of the othering mechanism throughout the analysis of particular pieces of exploration chronicles, political debate and nationalist propaganda and observe the adaptation of the narratives to the consolidation of national identity of the Italian society.

The Othering of African natives in Italian Explorations Chronicles

The first Italian explorations in Africa began soon after the unification and were accompanied by the development of geographical research centres. In 1867, the Italian Geographic Society was founded in Florence. In 1869, in Milan, another geographic observatory took the name of Society of Commercial Exploration in Africa, formalising the existence of an economic and commercial interest in the African region (Natili 2009).

As noted by Calchi Novati, the descriptive reports of travellers and explorers “stimulated the fantasy of the Italian population and contributed to determine the modality of Italian colonialism” (Calchi Novati 2011). A plurality of discursive imaginaries supported the first phase of the Italian colonial enterprise in Africa. In particular, exploration chronicles informed the Italian public sphere by converging the descriptions of episodes, landscapes, and peoples under extremely simplified narratives. These generated in the reader feelings of pity and disgust towards the customs of the indigenous populations, legitimizing direct correlations between race and morality.

The next sections tackle the formulation of specific narrative imputes on colonial natives, particularly focusing on the chronicled experiences of two explorers: Pellegrino Matteucci and Luigi Pennazzi. In his monograph, *In Abissinia* the explorer Matteucci reports his adventures in the region of Abyssinia, where he arrived in 1878 for a commercial expedition funded by the Society for Commercial Exploration. In *Dal Po ai due Nili* Pennazzi narrates his experience in the regions of Eritrea and Sudan in 1885.

Matteucci and Pennazzi's explorations take place at a very early stage of Italian colonialism. Their works represent two crucial examples of the first, almost romanced images of the colonized peoples, as they arrived to the Italian public. In the two monographs, it is possible to recognize a plurality of stereotypical categories within which explorers tend to circumscribe the identity of African natives through the adoption of specific negative indicators. Here we focus on four central narratives, which are proposed repeatedly and redundantly in the two monographs.

The Indigenous People Only Live For Today

Few are the people that can compare their history to the glorious past of the Ethiopians. However, few experienced such an intense decline, that today we question whether the contemporary Ethiopians belong to the same race as their predecessors, or if all historians, from Herodotus to Maltebrun, were mistaken when they described the portentous actions of the Ethiopians (Matteucci 1880, 1).

With these words, Pellegrino Matteucci introduces the Abyssinian population to his reader. The image he provides is one of a people that was incapable to maintain its glory and prosperity.

There is no track of the ancient Ethiopians. [...] They lost their name, as today we do not deal with Ethiopians but with Abyssinians (ivi, 9).

Matteucci clarifies that Ethiopians have nothing in common with Abyssinians. He immediately establishes the existence of a temporal gap between the great Ethiopian Empire and the miserable, uncivilized populations he encountered. This temporal gap enables the reader to move away from images of great empires, glory, and civilization to focus on the present condition of the Abyssinians. The author openly blames the Ethiopians for their decay, as they were not able to maintain their glory, nor to value their history:

A population that declines with no memories for its history is a population that lives for its time, not for immortality (ivi, 2).

Here, the explorer informs us of one central difference between civilized and uncivilized people: the one between people living for their time and people living for immortality. The Abyssinians developed as an a-historical society:

They don't care about tomorrow because they live for today (ivi, 17).

The idea of living for today is a priori discordant with the notion of civilization. It opposes the static conception of the day to the dynamic formulation of time and implies the impossibility of movement, development, and growth, which are at the root of European civilizations based on progress and modernization. As noted by Sòrgoni, "throughout the strategic rhetoric of ethnographic present, others appear immobile, fixed within an unmodifiable present, far away from the observer" (Sòrgoni 2008). This mechanism permits explorers to imprint into the consciousness of the Italian public the image of Africans as static subjectivities. They forgot their past, only exist in the present and have their future determined by the encounter with Europeans.

The Indigenous People Only Care For Profits

In a 1927 book designed for the 5th year of Italian elementary school, Barbetti provides a simplified narration of the dichotomised relation between whites and blacks:

The good Lord created blacks and white and made them choose between two gifts: gold and writing. Blacks, who are stingy and not very thoughtful, immediately shouted they wanted gold. [...] White people invented cars, boats, and weapons. They conquered the blacks, who kept digging for gold in the mines. However, now they do it for the whites (Barbetti 1927, 109).

The image of an immoral and irrational hunger for immediate profit exposed by Barbetti finds older roots in the exploration chronicles of Pennazzi. The a-historical representation of the Abyssinian society frames the native as an uncivilized creature who cannot see the long-term benefits of modernization. His circumscribed understanding of time only allow him to see the advantages of immediate profits. For this reason, African indigenous do not despise the Europeans in general, as the latter represents an opportunity of fast enrichment.

When they encounter Europeans who, though traveling with convenient means of transportation, show habits that appear as symbols of incalculable wealth in these countries, they know that there is always something that can be taken. A slice of bread, some leftovers, some tobacco (Pennazzi 1885, 31).

This description suggests the reader two main sensations: despise and compassion. On the one hand, the reader imagines the native as someone who can only act for profit. On the other, he feels sorry for his miserable condition, which he understands as a direct consequence of his lack of civilization. The encouragement of feelings such as pity and empathy are fundamental elements of the de-humanization of the colonial subject in the first phase of Italian colonialism. At this stage, the explorer highlights the natural inferiority of the indigenous subject,

which makes him greedy and promiscuous. Only the European and Italian intervention can make this condition change.

The Indigenous People Do Not Possess Moral Conduct

As noted by Dore, a central element in late 19th century ethnographies is the description of indigenous social customs as explicitly immoral (Morone 2011). Both Matteucci and Pennazzi tend to remark a strict connection between sexuality, superstition and religion in tribal cultures. African subjects appear to belong to a lower stage of history, where they have not been able to evolve into modernity and where their actions are still connected to magic and witchcraft. In Pennazzi, this characteristic is constantly remarked:

They are furious in their superstition. They welcome Europeans with indifference and they maintain a hatred for them, for progress and for civilization (ivi, 207).

Both Matteucci and Pennazzi show high despise towards tribal religious figures. In their descriptions, they appear disgusting in both their physical and their moral features:

Coptic priests are the worse religious ministers in the world. They are ignorant; they despise the Europeans, as they fear the contamination with those who master civilization and progress. They are dissolute. [...] They are greedy. They live begging and taking profits from the ignorance of the masses (Matteucci 1880, 17).

The great religious minister of the tribe acts sometimes in the vests of a priest, sometimes in the vest of a snake. [...] I tend to mistrust any form of religion but I rarely met a God minister uglier and more despicable than Abdul Kerr. He was a big fat negro, with a huge forehead, pronounced cheekbones, a horribly flat nose and huge lips. [...] He looked like a beast. [...] his attitude was not dissimilar from his appearance. He was uncivilized and superficial (Pennazzi 1885, 73).

The absence of a moral conduct is also strictly connected to the image of the African woman (Barbera 2011). According to Pennazzi, in Su-

dan, women remain with two options: living under the dominium of lazy, exploitative and violent husbands, or living a life of promiscuity. If the woman picks the first option then this is her destiny:

The woman is nothing but an instrument of labor and pleasure. When she is young, her beauty and talent make her value. [...] In Africa, marriage is conceived as a contract were parents are the seller, the young girl is the commodity and the man is the buyer (ivi, 39).

The majority of women who are not sold for marriage become prostitute. The second powerful image of the African female given by Pennazzi is the one of the Arab dancer:

Arab dancing is purely lascivious. It is the most obscene kind of sensuality or brutality. [...] Their movements and poses provoke despise rather than pleasure. They do not inspire love but provoke the opposite effect. Their feet beat furiously on the soil, their body shake under the violent impulse of their hips. They amuse the spectator and lay on him to offer their honour (ivi, 126).

The Plague of Islamism

In the work of the two explorers, Islamism is often portrayed as the central cause for the decay of African civilisations. Pennazzi insists on the role of both the Turkish and the Egyptian occupation of Sudan in bringing destruction and promiscuity to these territories. He blames the harsh socio-economic and moral conditions of Sudan on what he defines “the plagues of Islamism”.

Unfortunately, the two plagues of Islamism, i.e. prostitution, and slavery, are still very much present in the region. [...] Only those who travelled in Africa can understand how the practice of prostitution and the one, more horrible, of male prostitution, imported by the Turkish, are disseminated. [...] Brutish Turkish, they are armed and savages. Egyptians, they are greedy and fake. They are not able to comprehend the civilizing mission we are accomplishing, as they cannot see in civilization the means to fill their harem and their pockets (ivi, 300).

Here again, Africans are seen as victims to be saved from their unconscious and thoughtless adherence to the horrible customs and beliefs imported by Turkish and Egyptians.

I am hopeful that the natives of Sudan, notwithstanding their lost political autonomy, can resist the impulse of perdition and rise towards great principles of honour and morality. It is with these principles and in the influence of civilization that we will take down all the walls and save the next generations (ivi, 359).

The Praise of Europeans in Africa

A final recurrent narrative in the two monographs is the unconditional admiration for Europeans who settled in Africa. It does not matter who they are or what they do. It does not matter if they are good or bad people. In the words of Pennazzi:

A white man, when you meet him in these regions, is almost a fellow national (ivi, 50).

Matteucci only comes across one white man, who happens to be an Italian carpenter at the service of King Giovanni.

In Abyssinia, we only found one white man. He is Giacomo Naretti, a humble carpenter who respects and serves the prince [...] He is a friend of the king and loves him with enthusiasm. The king loves Naretti back, but he does not compensate him as he should (Matteucci 1880, 22).

Because of his uncivilised attitude, the indigenous emperor is not able to understand Naretti's loyalty, nor the value of his work.

A particularly interesting encounter is the one between Pennazzi and an Armenian trader named Rashid:

He was Armenian and Christian. His main occupation was hunting and selling beasts. He also declared to participate in the plurality of activities that come under the name of 'fluvial commerce of the Nile' among which the most important is the slave trade. This is none of my

business. Since I like Reshid, as he is relatively civilized for having been in the Orient for so long; since he possesses great weapons and he is served by a respectable entourage, I invite him to have coffee. I enjoy the conversation and I invite him to stay for lunch (Pennazzi 1885, 50).

In this passage, Pennazzi does not hide that the men in front of him is a slave trader. Nonetheless, he openly admits that this is not his concern, nor his business. As long as this white, rather civilized man is able to sustain a pleasant conversation, his profession no longer matters.

The writings of Pennazzi and Matteucci give us a clear idea of how the indigenous people of Africa were represented in the early stages of the colonial enterprise. The colonial subject is deprived of those elements of human dignity that characterize the civilized European citizen. He is unable to value the past, nor to dream about the future. He cannot appreciate beauty and easily get lost in the horrific temptation of Islamism.

In general, I would regard indigenous people as grownup children, having all the qualities and characteristics of the early age of human development (ivi, 301).

As a child who received no education, the African native belongs to an early stage of humanity. In the 20th century, the development of scientific racism and the concretization of a legislative code for the administration of the colonial people will take this de-humanizing narrative to a successive step. The native will no longer be victimized, but directly condemned to an irreversible condition of inferiority.

Tripoli's Time: The Italian Predestination in Africa

In the 19th century, the chronicles of explorations in Africa put the basis for the embryonal development of a colonial discourse in Italy. In the meantime, generals, journalists, and politicians contributed to legitimize the colonial enterprise in the motherland, supporting the nar-

rative of an Italian pre-destination in Africa. In the first decades of the 20th century, the sparkle of nationalism, the narrative of Italian exceptionalism and the challenge of colonialism were mutually reinforcing elements in the formation of an Italian national consciousness. Within this imaginary, colonialism was a fundamental discursive instrument.

To honour (our) heroes, celebrating their glories, their prestige, and the genius of (our) race and of (our) motherland (Morasso in Ricci 2005).

The mutually reinforcing creation of a nationalistic and colonial consciousness was instrumental to support the political interest over the Turkish occupied territory of Tripolitania. In this context, Enrico Corradini, respected journalist of *L'Idea Nazionale* and founder of the Italian Nationalistic Association, was one of the strongest supporters of the Italian invasion of Libya. The journalist arrives in Tripoli in 1911, a few months before the Italian occupation, to explore the area and evaluate the socio-political situation. The language used by Corradini dehumanises African subjects and proposes the Italian intervention as the only solution to their hopeless situation. His argument directly relies on very powerful images of the inhabitants of Tripolitania who appear miserable, sometimes even closer to animalistic than human semblances. Here are some passages reflecting the author disgust towards the inhabitants of the regions:

They were all around me, hundreds of miserable women, men, and children, dirty and horrifying. They were screaming at the guards and the guards were beating them. In front of this human regurgitation, I realized I arrived in places that had no comparison in terms of misery (Corradini 1911, 68). [...] A herd of human beings, with their mouth covered in the grass they devoured (ivi, 69).

Differently from Pennazzi and Matteucci, Corradini does not want to suggest pity in the reader. He is disgusted by what he sees. Nonetheless, he justifies colonial action on what is primarily a nationalistic narrative:

Considering the nation as an organized unity, colonialism is the necessary temporal and territorial expansion of its political life (ivi, 17).

I do not write about humanitarianism, as I sustain that Italy must occupy Libya for other reasons. Nonetheless, I am writing to let Italians know the conditions in the capital of Tripolitania (ivi, 80).

Corradini's objective is to give his Italian public an image of chaos, desolation and desperation.

Between Egypt and Tunisia, the Turkish controlled area of Tripolitania is a desolated land, a savage plague yet to civilize. The indigenous are less than a people; they are a herd of lonely individuals (ivi, 75).

A few months after Corradini's expedition, Italy occupied Libya. From this moment on, the nationalist rhetoric will remain the discursive instrument to sustain the colonial programme.

From Colonialism to Empire: The Exceptionalist Character of Fascist Imperialism

The rise to power of Benito Mussolini and the establishment of the Fascist regime drastically affected the collective imaginary of the Italian intervention in Africa. The central objective of Mussolini's colonial mission was the conquest of the lost territory of Ethiopia, and the establishment of an empire that could re-establish the lost legacy of the Roman one. The historian Calchi Novati recognises in this moment of profound transformation within Italian nationalism, "the passage from the contained dialectics of the liberal époque to the harsh methods of fascism" (Calchi Novati 2011). During Fascism, the concretisation of a direct form of control on the colonies inevitably led to the production of new sources of information and propaganda. Racist anthropology and colonial legislation surpassed ethnographic work in providing stimuli for the public imagination of Africa (Sòrgoni 2001).

Since Italy lost control of the Ethiopian territory to King Menelik II, the Ethiopian scar represented a powerful argument in the Fascist colonial propaganda. Mussolini blamed the previous liberal establishment

for its weak and unfocused politics in Africa. He believed that only a Fascist form of imperialism could bring Italy back to the legitimate glory of the ancient Romans. The invasion of Ethiopia represented a central momentum for the development of an imperialist discourse in Italian fascist propaganda. With the establishment of the empire and the dominium on the territories of Libya and Somalia, Fascist Italy accomplished its imperialistic mission in Africa. On the 9th of May 1936, Mussolini addressed the crowd in Piazza Venezia claiming that:

Ethiopia is Italian de facto because it was conquered by our winning troops. It is Italian by right because the civilization brought by the Roman sword triumphed on the barbarians. We are witnessing justice triumphing over arbitrary cruelty; it is our people's redemption triumphing on thousands of years of slavery (Mussolini 1936).

A Transplant of Civilization

One of the central priorities of the Fascist regime was to turn the Italian intervention in Africa into a purely imperialist mission. The imperialist narrative was instrumental in creating a discursive separation from both the previous experience of liberal colonialism and the colonial enterprise undertaken by other European nations. While the previous liberal establishment attempted to follow the steps of British and French rulings in Africa, the Fascist regime wanted to overcome colonialism with an empire.

Imperialism is the influence of civilization. We cannot think of an empire without military conquest. An empire is not a territorial nor a commercial expression of domination. It is the spiritual and moral challenge of the nation (Salis 1943, 1).

Under the Fascist regime, the imperialist challenge loses the emancipatory character that is entrenched in the civilizing mission. There is no interest in establishing commercial relations, nor in bringing progress

and modernization to African peoples. The empire is the result of the expansive nature of the Italian collective consciousness. It is the inevitable extension of the Fascist political project. As stated by General Graziani:

Before Fascism, the democracy in power conceived Africa as an adventure [...]. Today we conquered the empire. We begin a new creative cycle of race and civilization. This cycle is re-affirmed in the restoration of the Italian right to expand (Graziani 1938, 6).

The new creative cycle of race and civilization begins with the direct transplant of Italians in African territories. In this context, the scholar Renzo Meregazzi analyses the Italian administration of the A.O.I. (Italian Oriental Africa) pointing out the creation of a new system of demographic colonization:

The colonies of Oriental Africa shall not be considered as colonies of territorial and commercial exploitation. The system applied by other European powers was limited as the extraction of resources and tributes. [...] Fascism will create a new system of demographic colonization by transplanting in Africa all the means of our civilization (Meregazzi 1939, 12).

The transplant of the Italian race in Africa and the challenge of demographic colonization are two focal points of the fascist imperialist policy. General Graziani remarks the exceptionalist character of the Italian colonial enterprise stating that:

Each nation shows a different colonial attitude, which directly results from its historical tradition and from its racial connotations. We will operate with methods that are very different from the traditional ones: our Italians and Roman methods. [...] A new type of colonization will appear in history. [...] We will demonstrate to the natives that we are not exploiters nor distant masters. We will demonstrate to all European nations that the only way to create a sustainable colonization in Africa is by transplanting there a superior race (Graziani 1938, 14).

Rejecting Assimilation: the Problem of the *Meticcio*

The transplant of Italians in Africa was never imagined within the lines of a peaceful coexistence with the natives. On the contrary, the demographic propaganda was accompanied by the public rejection of assimilation and contamination with the African races.

The Italian colonial politics is instinctively racist. [...] We rejected the theory of assimilation for it is fake and dangerous. We appeal to our racist consciousness to safeguard the national character and the biological conditions of our dominant people (Meregazzi 1939, 68).

Racist scientists and anthropologists like Lidio Cipriani highly discouraged the practice of mixing races claiming that it could be biologically deleterious:

European races must not mix with African races. Anthropology makes it clear that the decay of many civilizations was directly caused by uncontrolled contamination among races. [...] When concerning dogs, everyone knows that reproduction with an inferior race generates a poor product (Cipriani 1938, 22).

The scientific and anthropological rejection of contamination with African races supported the implementation of an anti-assimilatory policy of segregation in Africa. The policy of race acted throughout strictly differential logics that confirmed the necessity to protect the purity of the Italian whiteness.

The politics of race represents the logic behind the principles of our colonialism. [...] The highest challenge of the Fascist colonial mandate is to protect the purity of the dominant race. We shall impede the development of a hybrid race (Meregazzi 1939, 19).

The politics of race was soon translated into legislation under the Fascist regime. In the previous decades, the relationship between colonisers and colonised peoples was regulated through a distinction between the former and the latter as subjects to different rights. In 1882, a first Italian colonial law distinguished between the Italian citizen, subject to

the law of the Reign of Italy, and the colonial subject, subject to customary law². In 1912, further citizenship legislation divided people in the colonies into a metropolitan population composed by Italian and European citizens and a colonial population composed by colonial citizens and colonial subjects³. Thus, already before the advent of Fascism, these policies were the expression of the anti-assimilatory logic entrenched within Italian colonialism.

The fascist establishment contributed to turn customary considerations about subjects and citizens into legal considerations about members of different racial groups. In 1933, Law n. 999 introduced the figure of the *meticcio* delineating his/her somatic traits⁴. According to the law, if an individual born by the union of a white man and a black woman acquired the traits of the white race, then he was recognized as white and vice versa. This flexibility was problematic for the Fascist argument on the defense of race. The Law of 1st July 1936 abrogated articles 18, 19 and 29 of the previous legislation, absorbing each kind of *meticcio* under the category of the indigenous⁵. The legislative discouragement of contamination was supported by a plurality of other regional policies “applying the principles of the new racial consciousness” (Meregazzi 1939, 80). In 1937, the governor of Eritrea emanated a law to forbid Italians and Europeans to live in indigenous neighbourhoods⁶. In the same year, the governor of Somalia forbidden subjects and metropolitan citizens to use the same public transportation⁷. The policy of colo-

² L. 5 Luglio 1882, n. 857. *Provvedimenti per la colonizzazione italiana di Assab*, in Borsi 1938, 65.

³ L. 13 Giugno 1912. *Sulla cittadinanza italiana*.

⁴ Legge 6 luglio 1933, n. 999. *Ordinamento organico per l'Eritrea e la Somalia*, art 18.

⁵ R.d.l. 1 giugno 1936, xvi, n. 1019. *Sull'ordinamento e l'amministrazione orientale Italiana*.

⁶ D.l. 12 giugno 1937, n. 620628, in Randazzo 2006, 234.

⁷ D.l. 1 gennaio 1937, n. 41679, in Randazzo 2006, 254.

nial segregation was finalized in 1938 with Law n. 1004 introducing the crime of “damage to the race prestige”⁸.

The Differentialist Logic of Fascist Imperialism

Before the advent of Fascism, Italian colonialism relied on both nationalist and civilizational propaganda. Both the Eritrean and the Libyan experiences were encouraged as an emancipatory mission on behalf of the Italian civilization. Especially in the first two decades of the Italian intervention in Africa, this narrative suggested a systematised dehumanization of the indigenous people, which were portrayed as unable to progress by themselves. Together with a profound nationalism, the colonial propaganda was strongly supported by images of natives as miserable, pitiful and helpless creatures that could only count on the intervention of European civilization to modernize.

The establishment of the Fascist regime will turn around this narrative. In general, the imperialist enterprise was supported by the combination of political propaganda, scientific racism and the formulation of a body of colonial legislation. All these elements were based on a strict differentialist logic, in which the indigenous could no longer be saved but had to be dominated for his naturally inferior racial condition. In other words, this differentialist logic enabled the Fascist regime to shift the focus from the future goal of civilization to the permanent condition of race. This was evident, for example, in the implementation of highly differentialist educational regimes. During fascism, education for colonised people was limited to the first three years of elementary school. Only in some special cases, African kids could continue their education with a further two years of technical specialisation. School remained

⁸ Legge 29 giugno 1939, n. 1004-XVII. *Sanzioni penali per la difesa del prestigio di razza di fronte ai nativi dell’Africa italiana*, art. 1.

focused on building a generation of African low-skilled workers that could support the concrete construction of the fascist empire. (Morone 2011).

The institutionalisation of racism in the colonies was also supported by anthropological and biological arguments. The latter defined the differentiation among human beings according to behavioural attitudes and physical appearances. In this purely pragmatic narrative, there was no space for pity or compassion. The inferiority of the African subject appeared natural and undeniable. Consequently, colonial authorities applied racist criteria also regarding salaries. African labour was generally worth one third of the labour carried out by Italians (Guazzini 2011). The famous racist anthropologist Lidio Cipriani was one of the main supporters of this narrative. He divided humanity into three main categories: men belonging to races who are able to create civilization, those who can receive civilization and those who naturally reject it.

These categories are established starting from mental faculties. [...] We must admit that races are differentiated not only in their physical characteristics but also in their mental ones (Cipriani 1938).

Cipriani approaches the study of races in their singularities arguing that “each race is circumscribed within the borders of its somatic and mental development” (ibid.). In doing so, he praises European races for their “continuous and autonomous development of progressive innovations, which are the product of exceptional brains” (ibid.).

In Cipriani, the black human being is “similar to a precocious white child” (ivi, 23) and condemned to this permanent status as

Only the white race contributes to the creation of the highest civilization, while the Africans, although sometimes susceptible to progress, show high tendency to regress (Cipriani 1938, 20).

The inferiority of the black individual must not be considered a prejudice of the white race. The inability to reassemble the plurality of notions that derive from precise experiences and observations and the ab-

solute lack of control for emotions are elements of the inferiority of the black subject that cannot be denied (Petrucci 1939, 20).

Eventually, Africans are regarded as naturally unable to learn. On the contrary, they can only poorly imitate the actions and customs of Europeans:

Regarding Africans, we shall not be mistaken by the fact that some of them became decent doctors or teachers. There is a profound difference between the repetition of action and the acquisition of a competence (ivi, 20).

This is true for biological reasons as “no one can train a hunting dog to behave like a pet” (ivi, 20). With this consideration, Cipriani concludes that “A Negro is closer to an anthropoid than to a white man” (ivi, 20). These words resume the evolution and crystallisation of the deeply racist narrative that supported the colonial propaganda.

The Two Colonial Others in the Italian Collective Consciousness: the Native to be Saved and the Native to be Dominated

In the 60 years of Italian colonial presence in Africa, we witness the shift from a narrative supporting colonialism as an emancipatory mission, to one encouraging imperialism as a demographic enterprise and a transplant of civilization. In a first moment, the African native is victimized for his condition. He is savage and, like a child who received no education, he has no idea of the difference between good and evil. He only lives for satisfying his immediate needs. In the view of Italian explorers, the contamination with Islamic populations is one of the central sources of cultural and moral decay in Africa. Consequently, both Pennazzi and Matteucci support colonialism as a civilising mission, aimed at educating natives to the notions of modernity.

In the first decades of the 20th century, the spread of nationalism in Italy helped reimagining the colonial mission as a patriotic destiny. The Italian intervention is there legitimised on grounds of a predestination of Italians in Africa. This predestination is no longer deniable, especially when Italy is compared to other European colonial powers. Here, the focus shifts from the destiny of the Africans to the destiny of Italians. The indigenous is no longer the other to be saved, nor pitied. He turns into the other to be dominated.

With the advent of Fascism, this narrative is reinforced by the formulation of an imperialistic discourse. The latter draws on the exceptionalist legacy of the Roman Empire and is established on a body of citizenship law that officialises the racial separation between colonizers and colonized. The anti-assimilation policy of the Fascist regime contributes to segregate Africans to the circumscribed framework of their inferior race. Eventually, the subjugation of natives is framed as the result of a natural mechanism of domination where civilization cannot be exported but only transplanted through the settlement of Italians in Africa. In this plan, African subjects are condemned by the science of racism to their unchangeable condition of inferiority.

In conclusion, this article looked at othering narratives on African natives to grasp the participation of the colonial experience in the development of the Italian collective consciousness. It addressed the combination of the civilizational, nationalist and racist narratives that composed the representation of Africans in public discourse, and tackled the construction of the African native as a dehumanised, inferior and negative other in the Italian public sphere.

In the *Discourse sur le Colonialism*, Césaire famously reminds us that colonialism is always about creating stereotypes and discursive constructions, which eventually legitimise violence and structural discrimination (Césaire 1955). These stereotypes penetrate collective consciousness and eventually crystallise in the recognition of racial difference as a fundamental marker to rethink cultural and social spaces.

As noted by Triulzi, in contemporary Italy, as it was in the colonial society, “past institutions and customs are still proposing prescribed models that design specific subjectivities between colonised and colonisers; expatriated and citizens” (Triulzi 2011). These models determine precise behaviours that are increasingly normalised and often become powerful instruments to legitimise racist discourse. To mention some examples, in 2003, Umberto Bossi declared on Radio Padana that In Milan, the housing system should prioritise Italians from Lombardia and not the first *Bingo Bongo* that comes. In 2013, the Northern League minister Roberto Calderoli addressed the parliament deputy Cecile Kyenge calling her an orangutan. The narrative was perfectly in line with what the racist anthropologist Lidio Cipriani wrote on *La Difesa della Razza* in 1938, when he argued that “A negro presents a facial development which cannot be compared to our race’ because ‘his physical appearance is more similar to that of a monkey” (Cipriani 1938, 20).

Indeed, the legacy of colonial racism is not a satisfactory condition to explain contemporary forms of racism in the country. However, engaging with the Italian colonial past can be useful to understand where certain stereotypes, images and forms of fear come from, to deconstruct them and, eventually, to defeat them.

Today, it is a widely accepted argument in post-colonial studies that the intrinsically dualistic logic that enabled forms of colonial domination in the 19th and 20th century did not vanish with the political act of colonialism. Hierarchies remained crystallised in modernity, transforming alongside societies. In recent times, many contemporary scholars in Italy noted that we might look at contemporary waves of racist violence and anti-migration narratives in the country as partly connected with the legacy of colonial thinking and with particular imaginaries of subaltern geographies and subjectivities (Mellino 2006; Triulzi 2008; Jedlowsky 2011; Proglione 2011; Mezzadra 2015). With a focus on the representation of the African native in Italian liberal and fascist public discourse, this paper pointed out a specific Italian way of

imagining the African other, which directly participated to the consolidation of a national collective identity.

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