

“THE REBIRTH OF THE EMPIRE ON THE FATAL HILLS OF ROME”.

Imperial mythologies of Italian Fascism

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Resumen: Este artículo pretende abordar el discurso imperialista y los mitos de la propaganda pro-imperio producidos en la Italia fascista, centrándose desde el origen en la etapa liberal hasta su apogeo durante los años de la conquista de Etiopía. El estudio abarca la continuidad y renovación de la vieja mitología colonial, así como el énfasis que la retórica fascista proyectó para el retorno de Italia al glorioso esplendor de su lejano pasado, reconducible a quince siglos atrás y más concretamente hasta los últimos vestigios del Imperio Romano. En esta perspectiva jugó un papel muy importante la dimensión nostálgica del discurso colonial fascista cuya coexistencia con la utopía totalitaria del “Hombre Nuevo” produjo una visión entrelazada entre el pasado y el futuro de la nación.

Palabras clave: Colonialismo italiano, Imperio fascista, Antigua Roma, Propaganda, Uso público de la historia.

Abstract: This article deals with the imperialistic discourse and myths of pro-empire propaganda produced in Fascist Italy, focusing on its development from its roots in the Liberal Age to its peak during the conquest of Ethiopia. Between continuity and renewal of the old colonial mythology, the emphasis of Fascist rhetoric was on the return of Italy to the glorious splendor of its distant past, dating back fifteen centuries and to the last vestiges of the Roman Empire. However, in this perspective, the nostalgic dimension of the Fascist colonial discourse coexisted with the totalitarian utopia of the “New Man”, producing an intertwined vision of past and future.

Keywords: Italian Colonialism, Fascist Empire, Ancient Rome, Propaganda, Public use of history.

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On the evening of 9 May 1936, appearing at the balcony of Piazza Venezia in front of a cheering crowd, Benito Mussolini proclaimed “the rebirth of the Empire on the fatal hills of Rome”, with words that were broadcast by radio throughout the Kingdom of Italy:

Italy finally has its empire. A Fascist empire, because it bears the indestructible signs of the will and power of the Roman *Littorio*, because this is the goal towards which the bursting and disciplined energies of the young, gallant Italian generations were urged for fourteen years. An empire of peace, because Italy wants peace for itself and for all, and only decides to go to war when it is forced to do so by compelling and incoercible necessities of life. An empire of civilisation and humanity for all the peoples of Ethiopia. This is in the tradition of Rome, which, after victory, assimilates peoples to its destiny. [...] The Italian people have created the empire with their blood, they will fertilise it with their work and defend it against anyone with their weapons.¹

Despite its brevity, Mussolini’s speech highlighted almost all the key topics of Fascist colonial rhetoric –the “disciplined energies of the young” nation, implicitly contrasted with the old colonial empires; the diversity of Italian expansionism and its mission of “civilisation and humanity”; the importance of “weapons” and “blood”, but also of labour and fertility– but focused above all on the reference to the imperial tradition of ancient Rome. The emphasis was on the return of (Fascist) Italy to the glorious splendour of its distant past, dating back fifteen centuries and to the last vestiges of the Roman Empire. However, in this Mussolinian perspective, the nostalgic dimension of Italian colonial discourse coexisted with the totalitarian utopia of the ‘New Man’, producing an intertwined vision of past and future. The reference to imperial Rome was linked to fascism’s claim that it was the bearer of a ‘new civilisation’, which would only be realised with the foundation of the empire.

This article deals with the imperialistic discourse and myths of pro-empire propaganda produced in Fascist Italy, focusing on its development from its roots in the Liberal Age to its peak during the conquest of Ethiopia. It is worth specifying that the history of Fascist

¹ Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, XXVII, eds. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (Firenze: La Fenice, 1956), 268-269: “L’Italia ha finalmente il suo impero. Impero fascista, perché porta i segni indistruttibili della volontà e della potenza del Littorio romano, perché questa è la meta verso la quale durante quattordici anni furono sollecitate le energie prorompenti e disciplinate delle giovani, gagliarde generazioni italiane. Impero di pace, perché l’Italia vuole la pace per sé e per tutti e si decide alla guerra soltanto quando vi è forzata da imperiose, incoercibili necessità di vita. Impero di civiltà e di umanità per tutte le popolazioni dell’Etiopia. Questo è nella tradizione di Roma, che, dopo aver vinto, assimila i popoli al suo destino. [...] Il popolo italiano ha creato col suo sangue l’impero, lo feconderà col suo lavoro e lo difenderà contro chiunque con le sue armi”.

imperialism –as with that of any other similar experience– does not end with the dissemination of words and images, ideas and representations. On the contrary, its history was first and foremost a story of wars and invasions, of violence and abuse, of settlements and traffic, of illusions and failures. Furthermore, most of the Fascist proclamations did not find confirmation in colonial politics, economics, and society. However, even the circulation of myths, narratives and ideological beliefs had a certain historical importance, influencing Italian society even more than the colonial space, as a large number of historical studies have argued. In a very recent reflection on the Fascist imperial project and its impact on Italian society, Valeria Deplano highlighted the change in historiographic perspective that has taken place in recent decades, in the wake of the more general ‘cultural turn’. The application of this approach to fascist studies has, indeed, shown how rhetoric, mythology and propaganda represented important tools of Fascist action even when they did not correspond to reality and were not actually realised².

In addition to historians, other scholars have also stressed the importance not only of political propaganda, but more generally of mass cultural production. As Edward Said stated in a famous page of his book on the links between Western culture and modern imperial experiences, the history of imperialism “is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings”³. And in particular the visions of the past, conveyed both by the ‘official’ communication of the regimes and by the cultural market products, have played a significant role in shaping the attitude of the West towards colonial populations and in legitimising the invasions and occupations of distant territories⁴. In the Italian case, the culture of imperialism was largely controlled from above by a dictatorial regime with totalitarian pretensions - the Fascist regime. The words and images used by Fascism acted on society, influencing the cultural imagination of Italians with regard to ‘others’. At the same time, this colonial discourse, with its nostalgia for the glories of the ancient Roman Empire, was based on the legacy of a series of myths and rhetoric that had been introduced at the beginning of Italian expansion in Africa, at the twilight of the Liberal Age.

² See Valeria Deplano, “Dalle colonie all’impero: l’Africa e il progetto nazionale fascista”, in *Il fascismo italiano. Storia e interpretazioni*, ed. Giulia Albanese (Roma: Carocci, 2021), 45-68, in particular 48.

³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 6.

⁴ As is well known, the interpretation of the past as a means of identity construction and political rhetoric, even in colonial history, is the subject of Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), a milestone book to which Said himself frequently refers.

1. Colonial mythologies before Fascism

In the Liberal Age, Italy ushered in its colonial policy at a time when major European powers already possessed huge empires⁵. This influenced both the strategic aims of the latecomer in the “Scramble for Africa”, and the storytelling that accompanied its colonial enterprises. On the first hand, Italy could only aspire to those territories that were still independent, such as the Horn of Africa. It was in this area that the first phase of Italian colonial expansion was directed, by the acquisition of the protectorates of Aseb (1882), Massawa (1885), and Asmara (1887), and then by the attempted military conquest of Ethiopia, which met with the resounding defeat at Adwa in 1896. On the second, the Italian government justified its expansionist policy with the idea that Italy too had the right to “a place in the sun”, like the other European powers. It was not only a matter of raising the Italian state, after its belated national unification, to the rank of a great power, but also of satisfying a need for land for the Italian people. In particular, Francesco Crispi –Prime Minister from 1887 until 1891 and again from 1893 until 1896– launched colonialism as a solution to the historical problem of labour migration. At the end of the 19th century, indeed, Italian emigration was reaching its peak, with millions of workers leaving the poorest regions of Southern Italy and the North-East for the American continent. Therefore, the conquest of African territories could be proposed as a remedy, providing landless peasants with new fertile lands to cultivate. Thinking of colonies as places to resettle large numbers of Italians who could not find work at home, Crispi inaugurated a discourse that would accompany the entire parabola of Italian imperialism: the myth of “demographic colonisation”, or the dream of an exotic “golden land” at the disposal of Italian workers⁶.

This myth, over the years, was linked to another, that of the “proletarian nation”. After the defeat at Adwa, Italy’s expansionist ambitions were revived in the first decade of the 20th century, with the institutionalisation of colonialist lobbies (in 1906 the *Istituto coloniale italiano* was founded) and the birth of new journals (such as the *Rivista colo-*

⁵ For an overview on European colonialism, see Wolfgang Reinhard, *Storia del colonialismo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002, orig. ed. 1996). On the history of Italian colonial expansion, since the 1970s there has been an intense season of studies, which has had among its protagonists Angelo Del Boca, starting from *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*, vol. 1, *Dall’Unità alla Marcia su Roma* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1976). For a more recent reference study, see Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2002).

⁶ Labanca, *Oltremare*, 71-72. On the link between emigration and colonialism, see also Daniel J. Grange, “Émigration et colonies: un grand débat de l’Italie libérale”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* XXX/3 (1983), 337-365.

niale) which were increasingly imbued with nationalist sympathies⁷. Among others, Enrico Corradini –a novelist, journalist, and politician, an emerging figure within the growing nationalist area– relaunched the idea of Italian imperialism with greater ideological consistency. In his political view, based on the concept of the nation as a value of overriding importance in historical development, Italy had to regain its lead over other nations, precisely because of its past as the cradle of European civilisation. However, in the age of imperialism, domination over immense colonial territories ensured the political and economic hegemony of a few great empires, forcing other nation-states into a subordinate role. Borrowing a rhetorical image from Marxism, Corradini described this international scenario as a sort of class struggle on a global scale, or rather as a struggle between rich and poor nations. Italy was one of the latter: it was “a proletarian nation” that saw part of its demographic strength leave “to seek bread and work across the ocean”, and consequently needed new lands to vent the prolificacy of its lineage⁸. In short, the problem of migration was closely linked to the imbalance in the world imperialist system, so nationalism affirmed “the need for international struggle so that the [Italian] nation could take its economic and moral place in the world”⁹.

Thus the myth of the “proletarian nation” –which Corradini formulated in a speech he gave in various Italian cities in January 1911– became one of the main topics supporting a new ambitious quest for colonial possession, in order to erase the shame of 1896. For Corradini (born in 1865), the defeat at Adwa was a shocking tragedy, representing for the young Italian nation-state the vanished hope of joining the status of imperial power. He was so obsessed with the failure of the military conquest of Ethiopia that in 1911 he wrote a novel on that historical event: *La guerra lontana* (*The Distant War*). The novel’s backdrop is a “distant war”, not only because it was fought in Africa, but also because the main characters did not feel for the enterprise, they did not internalise it, they did not understand the importance of the colonial conquest in restoring to Italy the greatness of its remote imperial past, that of Ancient Rome. It is only in the final scene that one of the main characters –more or less Corradini’s age– understands the extent of that historical failure, hoping that the new Italian gene-

⁷ Labanca, *Oltremare*, 105-107. On the establishment of the *Istituto coloniale italiano*, and its role in the revival of colonial expectations, see also Alberto Aquarone, *Dopo Adua: politica e amministrazione coloniale* (Roma: Ministero dei Beni culturali e ambientali, 1989), 255-410; Giancarlo Monina, *Il consenso coloniale. Le Società geografiche e l’Istituto coloniale italiano (1896-1914)* (Roma: Carocci, 2002).

⁸ Enrico Corradini, “Le nazioni proletarie e il nazionalismo” (1911), in Enrico Corradini, *Scritti e discorsi. 1901-1914*, ed. Lucia Strappini (Torino: Einaudi, 1980), 185.

⁹ Corradini, “Le nazioni proletarie e il nazionalismo”, 185-186.

rations will be able to make up for it: “you have to do –he says– what it was not possible for me and the others of my generation to do”¹⁰. That hope appears all the more significant because these words are pronounced on a ship leaving for Brazil, in front of the crowd of Italian emigrants: implicitly, the scene suggests that the colonisation of African lands was the solution to stem the flow of Italians abroad.

Corradini’s novel was part of a literary trend that also included the works of other famous authors as Alfredo Oriani, Giovanni Pascoli and Gabriele D’Annunzio (along with other lesser-known ones), who contributed to creating a colonial imagination and feeding the dream of Italian expansion in Africa. Despite the constraints of the Italian publishing market, limited in particular by a still high rate of illiteracy, a large number of books, poems, plays, and newspaper articles spread the myth of a “golden land”, that was rich in resources but inhabited by inferior peoples, which Italy had the right and the duty to conquer. National reunification –as Oriani argued in the novel *Fino a Dogali* (*As far as Dogali*, 1889)– was not a point of arrival, but a starting point for the redemption of Italy through the re-conquest of an empire. In the play *Più che l’amore* (*More than love*, 1906), D’Annunzio extolled Italy’s early colonial ventures as heroic experiences, worthy of the lineage of Giovanni Caboto (the 15th-century Venetian navigator and explorer). Even the archaeological missions to Africa, which brought to light the remains of Roman architecture, were recounted not as the recovery of a vanished civilisation, but of its own glorious past¹¹. This is why D’Annunzio used expressions such as “*mare nostro*” (“our sea”) or “*quarta sponda*” (“the fourth shore”) to name the coasts of North Africa, where it was possible to find “*l’orma latina nel suolo inospite*” (“the Latin footprint in the inhospitable soil”)¹². It was a Romanised and Italianised world.

This political and cultural discourse prepared Italian public opinion for the second phase of colonial expansion, which began in September 1911 with the Italo-Turkish War and ended in October 1912 with the conquest of the Tripolitania and Cyrenaica regions, in the

¹⁰ Enrico Corradini, *La guerra lontana* (Milano: Treves, 1911).

¹¹ See Simona Troilo, *Pietre d’oltremare. Scavare, conservare, immaginare l’Impero (1899-1940)* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2021).

¹² Gabriele D’Annunzio, *Canzoni delle gesta d’Oltremare* (Milano: Treves, 1912). On Italian colonialist literature of the late 19th and early 20th century, see Giovanna Tomasello, “L’Africa nella letteratura italiana tra Ottocento e Novecento”, in *Permanenze e metamorfosi dell’immaginario coloniale in Italia*, eds. Enrico Castelli and David Laurenzi (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2000) 191-201. In addition to this myth of the “Latin roots”, however, Tomasello also points to the circulation of a different image of Africa, as a territory traversed by primordial energies, that was present in avant-garde works such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s novel *Mafarka le futuriste* (published in French in 1909, translated into Italian in 1910).

coastal strip of Libya¹³. Although the Italian troops failed to establish effective control over Libyan territory, the feat seemed to erase the shame of Adwa and was celebrated as a great achievement. The “great proletarian had moved” –as the poet Pascoli put it in a famous oration¹⁴– and the Kingdom of Italy finally had a space to resettle its surplus of population.

As historical studies have amply demonstrated, the results would fall far short of expectations. The settlements of African lands were very modest in terms of numbers. Although it was the nearest colony, only a few thousand Italians moved into the arid and barely pacified Libyan territories: about a decade after the conquest, there were just over 17,000 Italian civilians¹⁵. As the historian Gioacchino Volpe stated with regret in the late 1920s, “the land, the much and good land that the Italian peasant was waiting for, did not come”¹⁶. However, in public discourse the myth of “demographic colonisation” continued to be emphasised in order to present Italian imperialism as different among that of the European empires, giving it moral purpose and ideological legitimacy.

This supposed uniqueness of Italian colonialism also had the effect of undermining the anti-colonialist front, and in particular of tearing the socialist movement apart. Its leadership was divided between those who opposed the colonial enterprise in the name of internationalism and those who supported it in the interests of the (Italian) proletariat¹⁷. The German-Italian sociologist Robert Michels, who was still moving within socialist circles, albeit from positions of revolutionary syndicalism that were increasingly critical of the party, reflected this polarisation in a paradigmatic way, arguing in a 1914 book for the “historical necessity” of Italian imperialism¹⁸. He was aware that a decisive push for colonial policy came from reasons of mere international prestige, in order to satisfy the desires of certain circles and to strengthen the national pride of the masses. However, in his opinion, even if from an ethical point of view the invasion of another country still constituted a problem, Italian imperialism was justified by the demographic need:

¹³ On national-imperialist mythology during the conquest of Libya, see Emilio Gentile, *La Grande Italia. The Myth of the Nation in the 20th Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009, orig. ed. 1997); Gabriele Proglia, *Libia, 1911-1912. Immaginari coloniali e italianità* (Milano: Mondadori-Le Monnier, 2016).

¹⁴ Giovanni Pascoli, “La grande proletaria si è mossa”, *La Tribuna*, 27 novembre 1911.

¹⁵ Labanca, *Oltremare*, 373.

¹⁶ Gioacchino Volpe, *L'Italia in cammino*, ed. Salvatore Lupo (Roma: Donzelli, 2010, orig. ed. 1927), 131.

¹⁷ See in particular Maurizio Degl'Innocenti, *Il socialismo italiano e la guerra di Libia* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1976).

¹⁸ Roberto Michels, *L'imperialismo italiano. Studi politico-demografici* (Milano: Società Editrice Libreria, 1914), VII.

This doctrine is one-sided, mannered, and borders on megalomania when it comes to inferring the dream of a hypothetical revived Roman Empire. Except that it contains a kernel of truth. It is that Italian imperialism bears a predominantly proletarian mark. So much so that Italian imperialism aims first of all at providing the surplus population, an essentially proletarian surplus, with a way of life more worthy of the nation to which it belongs.¹⁹

It was precisely for this reason –Michels continued– that “a large part of the socialists” had joined the colonialist cause²⁰, initiating a conversion to nationalism that would go on after the Great War and constitute one of the roots of the Fascist movement²¹ –though in 1911 Mussolini was imprisoned for taking part in demonstrations opposing the invasion of Lybia.

But in Michels’ words there was also a further allusion that deserves to be highlighted, namely the allusion to “the dream of a hypothetical revived Roman Empire”. The colonialist discourses of the Liberal Age, indeed, often included some reference to Ancient Rome and its imperial rule over the entire Mediterranean area. This remote experience of colonialism was closely linked with an ideological concept of the Italian role in the modern world, as the vanguard in the defence of European civilisation: a sort of Italian version of ‘white man’s burden’²². Returning modern Italy to the splendour of the distant past was one of the recurring themes of nationalist rhetoric, even when the myth of *romanità* remained under wraps. The spectre of Ancient Roman Empire always hovered over the Italian nation-state²³. And this spectre was particularly persistent in the field of foreign policy,

¹⁹ Michels, *L'imperialismo italiano*, 93: “Questa dottrina è unilaterale, manierata, e rasenta, laddove se ne deduce il sogno di un ipotetico Impero Romano redivivo, la megalomania. Se non che essa racchiude in sé un nocciolo giusto. Gli è che l'imperialismo italiano porta infatti una nota prevalentemente proletaria. Tant'è che l'imperialismo italiano mira innanzi tutto a procurare all'esubero di popolazione, esubero essenzialmente proletario, un moto di vita più degno di esso e della nazione a cui appartiene”.

²⁰ Michels, *L'imperialismo italiano*, 94.

²¹ See in particular Maddalena Carli, *Nazione e rivoluzione. Il «socialismo nazionale» in Italia: mitologia di un discorso rivoluzionario* (Milano: Unicopli, 2001), and Matteo Pasetti, *Tra classe e nazione. Rappresentazioni e organizzazione del movimento nazionale-sindacalista (1918-1922)* (Roma: Carocci, 2008).

²² See Romke Visser, “Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the *Romanità*”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 27/1 (1992), 5-22, in particular 7-8 about the pre-Fascist period.

²³ See Andrea Giardina, André Vauchez, *Il mito di Roma. Da Carlo Magno a Mussolini* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2000), 181-182. On the other hand, also in Edwardian England, references to the models of the classical age as antecedents of modern imperialism were widespread: see, for example, Evelyn Baring, *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* (London: Longmans Green, 1910); Charles P. Lucas, *Greater Rome and Greater Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912); James Bryce, *The Ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1914).

strengthening the ideas of Italian primacy and the country's civilising mission in the world²⁴.

Through this set of myths, the Italian colonialist discourse took on some elements of originality compared to the other European imperial powers. Firstly, the aim of "demographic colonisation" in order to solve the problem of transoceanic emigration and the image of Italy as a "proletarian nation" legitimised Italian colonialism as a model opposed to that of the great capitalist empires. Secondly, the nostalgic reference to a glorious, albeit remote, past sanctioned Italy's right to conquer hegemony in the Mediterranean area. Moreover, the myth of the Roman Empire gave a history to Italian colonial rule: while Europeans often represented the colonial world as a history-free blank slate, the Libyan coast belonged to the history of Roman civilisation.

However, despite the circulation of peculiar myths, in its essence the Italian colonial discourse was not very different from that of other European empires. It was based on certain stereotypes common to the whole Western imperialism, such as the ideas of the racial hierarchies, the superiority of the white man, the civilising mission towards 'inferior' peoples, but also the fascination with the exotic and adventure. And this opposition between 'us' and 'them' had settled at the canonical pace of the age of empires²⁵. Liberal Italy was late in conquering its colonial space, but not in constructing imperialist vocabulary, clichés, and imaginings.

2. The renewal of colonial discourse in early Fascism

In the 1920s, after Mussolini's seizure of power, the Fascist regime inherited from the Liberal Age not only overseas possessions, over which the Italian State exercised little control, but also a colonial discourse based on certain deeply-rooted myths: the idea of a "demographic colonisation", the image of the "proletarian nation", the nostalgia for the ancient Roman Empire. It is difficult to establish whether this mythology, which had been circulating in the Italian public sphere for decades, had really seeped into the collective imagination and conscience of the Italian people²⁶. Nevertheless, there is no

²⁴ For this thesis, see especially Federico Chabod, *Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896* (Bari: Laterza, 1951), but also Sergio Romano, "La cultura della politica estera italiana", in *La politica estera italiana (1860-1985)*, eds. Richard J.B. Bosworth and Sergio Romano (Bologna: il Mulino, 1991), 17-34.

²⁵ See Labanca, *Oltremare*, 224-228.

²⁶ The issue about the influence of imperialist culture and propaganda on metropolitan societies is widely discussed: for a collection of studies on the transmission of imperial ideas to the public in six European countries, see John M. Mackenzie (ed.), *European Empires and the People: Popular Responses to Imperialism in France, Britain, the*

doubt that over time, colonial imagery had reached a wide audience, as colonial themes were increasingly conveyed in magazines, books, popular novels, youth literature, school curricula, academic courses, museums, exhibitions, advertisements, postcards, photographs, and eventually even movies²⁷. As Patrizia Palumbo has written introducing a series of in-depth studies on the shaping of Italian colonial culture, “a highly romanticised image of Africa in nineteenth-century literature, which circulated among a limited and prevalently male audience, was later flanked by and re-elaborated into colonial fantasies for mass consumption”²⁸.

Exploiting this circulation of “colonial fantasies for mass consumption”, Fascism used the same myths developed during the Liberal Age²⁹, renewing them in some aspects, intensifying one or the other depending on the circumstances, and above all building a much more structured and powerful propaganda machine. From the mid-1920s, while the Fascist government started the ‘reconquest’ of Libya on a military level, using force to re-establish control over the ‘fourth shore’, on the propaganda level it concentrated the organisation, entrusting it to the Minister of Colonies Luigi Federzoni and the undersecretary Roberto Cantalupo, with the aim of popularising the colonial discourse and making it accessible to all. Between 1926 and the early 1930s, the regime’s initiatives were manifold: the strengthening of the *Istituto coloniale italiano* (renamed *Istituto coloniale fascista* in 1928), with the opening of a department in Tripoli; the publication of new magazines; the institution of the Colonial Day; the organisation of fairs and exhibitions, and of cruises and tourist trips to overseas territories;

Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011). As pointed out by Matthew Stanard, “although there might seem to be a growing consensus that the colonies reshaped everyday life in Europe, many remain unconvinced”: Matthew G. Stanard, “Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture: Toward a Comparative Research Agenda”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 44/1 (2009), 27-48, quote on 28.

²⁷ Since the 1990s, the culturalist approach to the study of Italian colonialism has produced a long list of publications on these topics: see among others Nicola Labanca (ed.), *L’Africa in vetrina. Storie di musei e di esposizioni coloniali in Italia* (Paese [Treviso]: Pagus, 1992); Silvana Palma, *L’Italia coloniale* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1999); Enrico Castelli and David Laurenzi (eds.), *Permanenze e metamorfosi dell’immaginario coloniale in Italia* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2000); Patrizia Palumbo (ed.), *A Place in the Sun. Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes (eds.), *Quel che resta dell’impero. La cultura coloniale degli italiani* (Milano: Mimesis, 2014).

²⁸ Patrizia Palumbo, “Italian Colonial Cultures”, in *A Place in the Sun*, ed. Palumbo, 5.

²⁹ The continuity of the Italian colonial discourse is quite evident also from a linguistic point of view: see Laura Ricci, *La lingua dell’impero. Comunicazione, letteratura e propaganda nell’età del colonialismo italiano* (Roma: Carocci, 2005).

partnerships with youth associations, and in particular with the *Gruppi universitari fascisti*³⁰.

This consensus machine in support of Italian imperialism definitively removed the distance between culture and propaganda, putting the ideological and discursive materials inherited from the Liberal Age at the service of the Fascist idea of nation and empire. Nevertheless, even from this point of view, the uniqueness of the Italian case should be put back into perspective. In the interwar period, the use of propaganda tools such as colonial days, youth literature, school textbooks, racist expositions, and so on, were common practices in all imperial powers. As Matthew Stanard put it, “European pro-empire propaganda between the wars used similar means and conveyed strikingly similar messages, suggesting a shared colonial culture, even if each country produced its own distinctive message”³¹.

Among the colonial myths inherited by Fascism, the one that was most emphasised as a “distinctive message” was the reference to the ancient Roman Empire, which was used as an imaginary model since the birth of the movement. Various symbols and rituals of the Fascist Party –such as the *fascio littorio*, the Roman salute, the ranks of the black shirts, the names of the paramilitary militias, the marching step of the squadristi– were inspired by the distant imperial past³². Although previously, when he was still a socialist leader, Mussolini had called Rome a “huge vampire-city sucking the best blood of the nation” (1910), by the eve of Italy’s entry into the First World War he had changed his attitude towards the Italian capital, describing it as “unique and immortal” (1914)³³. Then, in the making of Fascism, “the exaltation of *romanità*, as a reminder of national traditions, served to give compactness to the movement, accentuating its mystical-warrior side”³⁴. In the early years of the régime, the concept most associated with the classic vision of *romanità* was that of ‘discipline’, as a linchpin

³⁰ On these and further régime initiatives, see Valeria Deplano, *L’Africa in casa. Propaganda e cultura coloniale nell’Italia fascista* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2015).

³¹ Stanard, “Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture”, 32.

³² See Simonetta Falasca Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 90-118.

³³ See Paola S. Salvatori, *Mussolini e la storia. Dal socialismo al fascismo (1900-1922)* (Roma: Viella, 2016), 57.

³⁴ Giardina, Vauchez, *Il mito di Roma*, 214. In Italy, scholars began to investigate this theme as an object worthy of historical interest from the mid-1970s on. In particular some historians of the ancient age (such as Luciano Canfora, Aldo Schiavone, Mariella Cagnetta, and then Andrea Giardina) have played a crucial role in this field of study, while only since the 1990s have historians of the contemporary age begun to pay attention to the topic: among the first and most important works, see Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell’Italia fascista* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1993). For a review article on this debate, see Paola Salvatori, “Fascismo e romanità”, *Studi storici* 55/1 (2014), 227-239.

of an idea of community which, according to Fascist rhetoric, linked ancient imperial Rome to Mussolini's new Italy. In one of his most frequently quoted speeches, delivered on 21 April 1922 celebrating the legendary foundation of the 'Eternal City' – a date which, following the seizure of power, entered the Fascist regime's calendar as the *Natale di Roma* (Birthday of Rome)– Mussolini outlined in full the meaning he attached to the myth of the Roman origins of modern Italy:

Celebrating the Birthday of Rome means celebrating our civilisation, it means exalting our history and our race, it means building on the past in order to move into the future. Rome and Italy are in fact two indivisible terms. [...] Of course, the Rome we honour is not only the Rome of monuments and remnants, the Rome of glorious ruins. [...] The Rome that we honour, but above all the Rome that we long for and prepare for, is different: it is not a question of famous stones, but of living souls; it is not a nostalgic contemplation of the past, but a hard preparation for the future. Rome is our point of departure and our point of reference; it is our symbol or, if you prefer, our myth. We dream of a Roman Italy, that is, wise and strong, disciplined and imperial.³⁵

The emphasis on the ancient roots of Fascist Italy was part of a more general political use of historical analogy as a way of building and nurturing consensus. In a long-term historical vision, in addition to the distant Roman Empire, Fascist culture turned the spotlight on various periods, figures, and events (such as Greek and Etruscan antiquity, the knights of the Middle Ages and the princes of the *Rinascimento*, the French Revolution and Bonapartism, Giuseppe Mazzini, the *Risorgimento* and the unification of the Italian state), composing a heterogeneous and not very coherent storytelling³⁶. In this composite pantheon of historical myths, in any case, ancient Rome represented the cornerstone, as it blended political, moral and cultural characteristics that were particularly functional to Fascist propaganda.

³⁵ Benito Mussolini, "Passato e avvenire", *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 21 April 1922, then in Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, XVIII, eds. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (Firenze: La Fenice, 1956), 160-161: "Celebrare il Natale di Roma significa celebrare il nostro tipo di civiltà, significa esaltare la nostra storia e la nostra razza, significa poggiare fermamente sul passato per meglio slanciarsi verso l'avvenire. [...] Certo, la Roma che noi onoriamo, non è soltanto la Roma dei monumenti e dei ruderi, la Roma delle gloriose rovine [...]. La Roma che noi onoriamo, ma soprattutto la Roma che noi vagheggiamo e prepariamo, è un'altra: non si tratta di pietre insigni, ma di anime vive: non è contemplazione nostalgica del passato, ma dura preparazione dell'avvenire. Roma è il nostro punto di partenza e di riferimento; è il nostro simbolo o, se si vuole, il nostro mito. Noi sogniamo l'Italia romana, cioè saggia e forte, disciplinata e imperiale".

³⁶ For a recent collection of case studies, see Paola Salvatori (ed.), *Il fascismo e la storia* (Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 2021).

Moreover, as was already explicit in the above-mentioned speech, the celebration of the Roman past did not voice a mere nostalgic feeling, but envisaged a vision of the future. According to the historian Jan Nelis, “from the early days of Fascism, the past was seen as a source of ideals and energy, which served as both a point of departure and a goal to surpass”³⁷. The traditional myth of Rome was put forward again by Fascism as a revolutionary project for modernity³⁸. As emerges from a speech Mussolini delivered in October 1923, Italians had to be proud “of the glories of the past”, but they should not “to live on unearned income as degenerate and parasitic grandchildren”, rather use the past as a model to build the Italy of the future³⁹.

The restoration of the empire on the *mare nostrum* was part of this vision of *romanità* as a concept that straddled time and space, past and future. Mussolini had been saying this since 1921:

It is destiny that the Mediterranean will be ours again. It is destiny that Rome will once again be the leading city of civilisation in all of Western Europe. Let us raise the flag of empire, of our imperialism, which must not be confused with Prussian or English imperialism.⁴⁰

As soon as the Fascist regime relaunched Italian colonial policy, first and foremost with the ‘reconquest’ of the Libyan coast, the myth of Imperial Rome became functional to the propaganda discourse concerning Italy’s role as a power in the Mediterranean and international scenario. In other words, the reference to the ancient Roman Empire became the rhetorical accompaniment for Fascist imperial aims. It is emblematic of this link that the first Colonial Day was celebrated to coincide with Birthday of Rome on 21 April 1926. In the same year,

³⁷ Jan Nelis, “Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of “*Romanità*””, *The Classical World* 100/4 (2007), 391-415, quotation on 409. On the relationship between past and future in fascist ideology, by the same author see also Jan Nelis, *From ancient to modern: the myth of romanità during the ventennio fascista. The written imprint of Mussolini’s cult of the ‘Third Rome’* (Bruxelles-Roma: Institut Historique Belge de Rome, 2011).

³⁸ This thesis, already argued by many scholars (as Emilio Gentile, Roger Griffin, Simometta Falasca Zamponi, and Ruth Ben-Ghiat among others), is further supported by Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2012).

³⁹ Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, XX, eds. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (Firenze: La Fenice, 1956), 56.

⁴⁰ From the speech delivered in Trieste on 6 February 1921, then in Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, XVI, eds. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (Firenze: La Fenice, 1955), 159-160: “È destino che il Mediterraneo torni nostro. È destino che Roma torni ad essere la città direttrice della civiltà in tutto l’Occidente d’Europa. Innalziamo la bandiera dell’impero, del nostro imperialismo, che non dev’essere confuso con quello di marca prussiana o inglese”.

during his first visit to Tripolitania, Mussolini stated that Fascism was bringing “the triumphant and immortal Rome’s *Littorio* back to the shores of the African sea”⁴¹. From this point of view –as Gustavo Corni has argued– the Fascist imperial design had a cultural, rather than a territorial, perspective; and this aspect constituted a partial difference from the notion of the *Lebensraum* (“living space”) that German National Socialism would pursue in the 1930s⁴².

As was already the case in Liberal Italy, the myth of Rome was stressed both to legitimise Italian imperialism and to distinguish it from others, contrasting in particular the expansionist policy of Fascist Italy with British imperial rule. The latter was represented by Fascist propaganda as an experience now definitively in decline, thus echoing the old paradigm of the historian Edward Gibbon, who, in the six volumes of *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789), had prophesied a similar fate for the British colonies⁴³. From this neo-Gibbonian perspective, the anti-British polemic acquired a cultural-historical significance. The end of British rule over the Mediterranean implied the restoration of Roman civilisation, and with it the hegemony of the Catholic Church. As, for example, the ancient historian Ettore Pais wrote, quoting Dante’s well-known verse from *Purgatorio*, Fascist Italy was reclaiming the legacy of “that Rome where Christ is a Roman”, which had seen the birth of “the powerful entity of the Christian church, which also inherited in part the concept of imperial power and one day had to subject sovereigns and peoples to its moral authority”⁴⁴.

Here we can point to a further function of Fascist imperial rhetoric. By identifying, somewhat paradoxically, the civilisation of ancient Rome with Christianity, from the mid-1920s the theme of empire also played a role in the convergence of Fascist imperialism and the universalist tradition of the Catholic Church⁴⁵. According to the regime’s apologists and ideologists, the line of development of Latin civilisation

⁴¹ From the speech delivered in Tripoli on 11 April 1926, then in Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, XXII, eds. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (Firenze: La Fenice, 1957), 114.

⁴² See Gustavo Corni, “Impero e spazio vitale nella visione e nella prassi delle dittature (1919-1945)”, *Ricerche di storia politica* XVII/3 (2006), 345-357. For a comparative study of the two expansionist visions, see also Aristotle A. Kallis, *Fascist Ideology. Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922-1945* (London-New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁴³ See Laura Cerasi, “Empires ancient and modern: strength, modernity and power in imperial ideology from the Liberal period to Fascism”, *Modern Italy* 19/4 (2014), 421-438.

⁴⁴ Ettore Pais, “Il significato politico della storia di Roma”, *Annuario dell’Università di Roma* (1929-1930), 17-32, quotation on 30.

⁴⁵ See Renato Moro, “Il mito dell’Impero in Italia fra universalismo cristiano e totalitarismo”, in *Cattolicesimo e totalitarismo. Chiese e culture religiose tra le due guerre mondiali (Italia, Spagna, Francia)*, eds. Daniele Menozzi and Renato Moro (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2004), 311-371; Gabriele Rigano, “Fascismo e religione: un culto per la nazione imperiale”, in *Il fascismo italiano*, ed. Albanese, 139-159.

originated with Roman imperialism, passed through Catholic universalism and led to Fascism. In this way, Fascism aimed to bring the Catholic tradition into the mainstream of *romanità*, separating it from its Semitic-Oriental roots and seeking the consent of the anti-Semitic currents within Italian Catholicism.

3. A new myth for Fascist imperialism

In the 1930s, while Mussolini's regime focused increasingly on colonial policy, first by completing the 'reconquest' of Libya (1931), then by militarily attacking Ethiopia (1935) and proclaiming the birth of Italian East Africa (1936), the notion of empire became one of the main keywords of Fascist propaganda. The tenth anniversary of the March on Rome was celebrated in a Roman-imperial atmosphere, drawing a line of absolute continuity between ancient and contemporary times. The parallelism between imperial Rome and Fascist Italy, and between the great figures of the past and Mussolini, was also grasped by foreign observers. As, for example, Kenneth Scott wrote in 1932,

It is no wonder that more than one has seen in the new regime a restoration of imperial Rome. The leader of Fascist Italy has found a parallel for our own times, it seems, in the Italy of Augustus and of the Empire, and his deeds and words are a proof of his reading of Roman history and drawing of parallels. Symbols of the past and its significance for modern Italy are everywhere in Italian life today –even on postage stamps, where we find Julius Caesar, Augustus, and the wolf of the Capitoline. Perhaps Fascist theory is correct, and the Roman Empire never really died but goes on in the New Italy and its premier.⁴⁶

Through an increasingly wide-ranging media system, with radio and cinema available in addition to traditional propaganda tools, the Fascist colonial message focused in particular on two consolidated rhetorical cores. The first, of course, concerned the cult of ancient Rome, the myth of the Roman Empire and the concept of *romanità*. The second dealt with the idea of demographic expansionism, linked to the myths of the "proletarian nation" and the "empire of labour", whereby Italian imperialism was justified by the need to provide the country with a large colonial space, imagined as a frontier, a sort of Far West to be conquered in order to promote a migration of workers, to solve the problem of overpopulation, and to alleviate the excessive demographic burden on the Italian labour market⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ Kenneth Scott, "Mussolini and the Roman Empire", *The Classical Journal* 27/9 (1932), 645-657, quotation on 656-657. The author was a historian of antiquity at the Western Reserve University.

⁴⁷ See Labanca, *Oltremare*, 154-157.

Meanwhile, at this stage in the history of Italian colonialism, another myth was added to these two patterns –i.e. the ‘Roman empire’ and the ‘empire of labour’– of Fascist imperialist rhetoric. It was an unprecedented discourse, which was not addressed to the masses and remained confined to some political-intellectual circles of the regime, but hinged on one of the ideological and programmatic pillars of Fascism, namely corporatism. In fact, this new theme of Fascist propaganda outlined a model of empire – or more precisely, of imperial governance – which the promoters themselves called “corporatist colonialism”. According to this project, the Fascist regime had to export the corporatist system to the overseas territories, in order to recreate a working community based on co-operation between all productive subjects, in the collective interest of the metropole but also of the colonies themselves. Despite the fact that in propaganda terms the discourse of “corporatist colonialism” was less powerful than the myth of *romanità*, which undoubtedly had more appeal to public opinion and popular culture, it was a further rhetorical tool for legitimising Italian imperialism⁴⁸.

First of all, this idea allowed the Italian imperial dream to be connected with the theory of corporatism as a ‘third way’ between liberalism and socialism –a theory that since the 1920s had favoured the transnational circulation of the Fascist model and its insertion into the political mainstream of the time⁴⁹. While Fascism had inherited the leitmotifs of “demographic colonisation”, the “proletarian nation”, and the ancient Roman Empire from the Liberal Age –albeit now modifying them in terms more in keeping with the regime’s propaganda– the discourse of “corporatist colonialism” renewed the ‘civilising mission’ of Italian imperialism, as it were fascistising it. Its implementation would have demonstrated the existence of an original, and specifically Fascist, system of colonial governance, different from all others of the past and present, thus helping to strengthen the self-representation of Fascism as a new, innovative, epoch-making political force. The Fascist empire would find in this way a further ideological legitimisation as an “empty social space” –according to Sergio Panunzio’s definition⁵⁰– in which to give life to the most fulfilled corporatist order in history.

⁴⁸ See Matteo Pasetti, “Un “colonialismo corporativo”? L’imperialismo fascista tra progetti e realtà”, *Storicamente* 12 (2016), DOI 10.12977/stor655.

⁴⁹ On the importance of corporatism for the success of Fascism as a universal ideology, see Matteo Pasetti, *L’Europa corporativa. Una storia transnazionale tra le due guerre mondiali* (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2016); Matteo Pasetti, “Corporatist Connections: The Transnational Rise of the Fascist Model in Interwar Europe”, in *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945*, eds. Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rosolinski-Liebe (New York: Berghahn, 2017).

⁵⁰ Sergio Panunzio, “I sindacati e l’organizzazione economica dell’Impero”, *Rassegna economica dell’Africa italiana* (April 1938), 553-564, quotation on 557.

Through the link between colonial expansion and corporatism, Fascist imperialism represented itself not so much as a project of territorial conquest to satisfy Italian ambitions, but as a real political laboratory, aimed at establishing a new social order. Furthermore, the corporatist doctrine provided a radical, anti-bourgeois and anti-liberal, as well as anti-socialist, connotation to the fascist colonial discourse. Exported overseas, corporatism became an ideological weapon at the service of fascism in the international struggle against plutocratic empires. So we read, for example, in the pages of *Critica Fascista*, in an article on corporatism as “new colonial policy”, by Guido Fornari:

By resolving the existing conflicts between politics and economics, and between economics and ethics, the corporation satisfies the thirst for justice of peoples offended by the methods of exploitation practised in their territories and responds to the demands of peoples of backward civilisation who rise up against the colonisers. [...] Even in its most recent evolution, in its gradual transition from direct government to constitutional autonomy, liberal colonisation continues to live in misunderstanding and does not eliminate the great misapprehension that exists with the coloured races.⁵¹

In this way, the export of corporatism to the colonies was also intertwined with the debate on international relations⁵². In fact, some proponents of “corporatist colonialism” were animators of a geopolitical current that prefigured the creation of a “great space” between the two shores of the Mediterranean, called “Eurafica”, from which the “plutocratic powers” were to be expelled in accordance with a sort of fascist version of the Monroe doctrine⁵³. And we could almost see in these theorisations an anticipation of the model of empire conceptualised by Carl Schmitt in the late 1930s –based on the notion of the *Großraum* (“great space”)– which also had its proponents in Italy as the only way to restore international stability⁵⁴. This does not alter

⁵¹ Guido Fornari, “La Corporazione come nuova politica coloniale”, *Critica fascista* (15 April 1934), 144: “La corporazione, risolvendo i contrasti già esistenti tra politica ed economia e tra economia ed etica, soddisfa la sete di giustizia dei popoli offesi dai metodi di sfruttamento praticati nei loro territori e risponde alle domande dei popoli di civiltà arretrata che insorgono contro i colonizzatori. [...] Anche nella sua più recente evoluzione, nel suo graduale trapasso dal governo diretto all’autonomia costituzionali, la colonizzazione liberale continua a vivere nell’equivoco e non elimina il grande malinteso esistente con le razze di colore”.

⁵² See Jens Steffek and Francesca Antonini, “Toward Eurafica! Fascism, Corporativism, and Italy’s Colonial Expansion”, in *Radicals and Reactionaries in Twentieth-Century International Thought*, ed. Ian Hall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 145-169.

⁵³ See Marco Antonsich, “Eurafica, dottrina Monroe del fascismo”, *Limes* (1997/3), 261-266.

⁵⁴ See Carl Schmitt, *Il concetto di impero nel diritto internazionale*, ed. Luigi Vannutelli Rey (Roma: Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista, 1941); Mario G. Losano, *La geopo-*

the fact that the notion of “great space” in Fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany was translated into different expansionist projects, determined by a combination of factors that were not only ideological⁵⁵. However, the analogy between the Italian debate and the German philosopher’s thinking not only concerned the efforts to redefine geopolitical scenarios, but also the question of the nation, both as a principle of international law and as a cornerstone of the entire ideological construction of fascism⁵⁶. In the Fascist establishment, many argued that colonial expansion and power politics implied a profound rethinking of the relationship between nation and state. The proclamation of the Fascist Empire in 1936 seemed to be a turning point in this respect as well.

4. 1936: the “Rebirth of the Empire”

In some respects, the Ethiopian War of 1935-36 represented the achievement of the Fascist imperial project⁵⁷. The military conquest was accompanied in Italy by increasingly orchestrated and powerful propaganda, which in terms of extent, co-ordination and uniformity had more similarities with the mobilisation campaigns conducted by the major powers in the two world wars than with the more limited support for the African or Asian colonial enterprises of the United Kingdom or France⁵⁸. All mass media were put at the service of fascist colonial policy, in a joint effort to propose a “coordinated image for an empire”⁵⁹.

As we have seen in Mussolini’s words quoted at the beginning of this article, the foundation of Italian East Africa was presented as “the rebirth of the empire” restoring the hegemony of *romanità*. School textbooks, for example, were updated by emphasising the continuity between the ‘empire of the Caesars’ and the ‘Fascist empire’, in order to disseminate an imperial identity among students⁶⁰. In all spheres of public life –from architecture to sculpture, from illustrated magazines to advertising, from newsreels to photographs– images inspired by a

litica del Novecento. Dai Grandi Spazi delle dittature alla decolonizzazione (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2011), 62-67.

⁵⁵ See Kallis, *Fascist Ideology*, 47-56.

⁵⁶ See Alberto De Bernardi, “L'impero totalitario”, *Filosofia politica* XXV/2 (2011), 303-313.

⁵⁷ See especially Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*, vol. 2, *La conquista dell'Impero* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1979).

⁵⁸ See Nicola Labanca, *La guerra d'Etiopia 1935-1941* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2015), 105.

⁵⁹ See Adolfo Mignemi (ed.), *Immagine coordinata per un impero. Etiopia 1935-1936* (Torino: Gruppo Editoriale Forma, 1984).

⁶⁰ See Alessandro Pes, “Becoming imperialist: Italian colonies in Fascist textbooks for primary schools”, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18/5 (2013), 599-614, in particular 608-612.

mythological-historical canon alluding to the Roman tradition multiplied⁶¹. The cinema also responded to the appeal launched by the regime to celebrate Italy's new imperial dimension, thanks to screenwriters and directors like Umberto Barbaro, Mario Camerini, Augusto Genina and Mario Soldati, and films such as *Scipione l'Africano* (1937)⁶². At the same time, films and documentaries also served to convey an image of the colonies that was more in keeping with the myth of the "empire of labour", stressing the transformations brought about by the settlers and their contribution to the modernisation of the colonised territories. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat stated, most empire films "assert the Italians' ability to impose a vision of modernity in sync with Fascist social and military aims, one founded on the regimentation of bodies and the mastery and transformation of terrain"⁶³.

In the late 1930s, however, the most eloquent example of imperial-fascist storytelling was the *Mostra augustea della romanità* (Augustan Exhibition of Romanity): staged in Rome for the bimillennial of the birth of Augustus from 23 September 1937 to 7 November 1938, it attracted almost a million visitors. The symbiosis between *romanità* and Fascism was exalted here in particular through the identification of Augustus and Mussolini⁶⁴. As the exhibition catalogue explained,

With Fascism, at the behest of the Duce, every ideal, every institution, every Roman work returned to shine in the new Italy, and after the epic feat of the fighters on African soil, on the ruins of a barbaric empire, the Empire of Rome rose again.⁶⁵

⁶¹ See Laura Malvano, *Fascismo e politica delle immagini* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988), 151-156.

⁶² See Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *La cultura fascista* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2000), 209-223. For more on this subject, see also by the same author Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); and moreover Gian Piero Brunetta, *L'Italia sullo schermo. Come il cinema ha raccontato l'identità nazionale* (Roma: Carocci, 2020), 167-187.

⁶³ Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema*, XVI.

⁶⁴ See Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*, 131-132; Giardina, Vauchez, *Il mito di Roma*, 245-254; Aristotle Kallis, "'Framing' Romanità: The celebrations for the Bimillenario Augusteo and the Augusteo-Ara Pacis Project", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46/4 (2011), 809-831; Vittorio Caporrella, "Il metodo figurale nell'estetica fascista. La Mostra Augustea della Romanità", in *Estética dos regimes autoritários e totalitários*, eds. Nuno Rosmaninho and Manuel Ferreira Rodrigues (Reiberão: Húmus, 2021), 169-199.

⁶⁵ *Bimillenario della nascita di Augusto, 23 settembre 1937 - 23 settembre 1938. Mostra augustea della romanità. Catalogo*, ed. Roberto Vighi (Roma: Colombo, 1938), 363: "Col fascismo, per volere del Duce, ogni ideale, ogni istituzione, ogni opera romana ritornò a splendere nell'Italia nuova, e dopo l'epica impresa dei combattenti in terra africana, sulle rovine di un impero barbarico risorge l'Impero di Roma".

The whole exhibition was set up in a style designed to convey an idea of continuity between Roman civilisation and the fascist totalitarian state, whereby Mussolini's dictatorship became proof of Rome's eternity and *romanità* became a source of legitimisation for Fascism's hegemonic vocation, thanks to the recovery of the ancient past for the use and consumption of the contemporary society⁶⁶.

In this way, the myth of Rome served to reinvent the nation by adopting an imperial model that retrieved the idea of *romanità* from the past but transposed it into modernity, as a crucial element of the Fascist totalitarian project for the integral renewal of consciousness and the palingenesis of the nation. The words of some of the main Fascist leaders, as well as those of several intellectuals in the service of the regime, were eloquent in this sense: for Giuseppe Bottai, Fascism represented “not a restoration but a renovation, a revolution in the idea of Rome”; to the interwar archaeologist Carlo Cecchelli, “the vestiges of *romanità* are, above all else, ferment for life. They bear witness to a great past that does not just resolve itself in the present; they are signs of a millennial nobility that has become current again, and will develop itself further in the future”⁶⁷.

On a discursive level, the main novelty consisted in the centrality of references to race as a biological inheritance and the boundary line of Italian identity. In recent times, several historical studies have shown that racism was present in Italian culture –as well as in European culture in general– long before the racial laws of 1938 and even before the advent of Fascism⁶⁸. For example, since the 19th century, racial hierarchies appeared both in the school education of Italians and in various products of the cultural market; and even liberal governments did not appreciate romantic relationships between African women and Italian settlers. However, although racism was not its invention, Fascism “definitively made race and adherence to racist values fundamental elements for inclusion in the national community”⁶⁹. The very concept of Romanity underwent a semantic twist in this sense, taking on a racial connotation that did not belong to the history of the Roman Empire.

⁶⁶ See Maddalena Carli, *Vedere il fascismo. Arte e politica nelle esposizioni del regime (1928-1942)* (Roma: Carocci, 2020), 163.

⁶⁷ Giuseppe Bottai, “Roma e fascismo”, *Roma* (15 October 1937), 352; Carlo Cecchelli, “Itinerario imperiale”, *Capitolium* (13 April 1938), 168. Both quotations are from Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity*, 2.

⁶⁸ See for example Giulia Barrera, “The construction of racial hierarchies in colonial Eritrea: The Liberal and early Fascist period, 1897-1934”, in *A place in the sun*, ed. Palumbo, 81-115.

⁶⁹ Deplano, “Dalle colonie all'impero”, 65.

Of course, it remains difficult to measure with the tools of the historian the effectiveness of the mythologies and discursive practices conveyed by fascist propaganda. From this point of view, the documentary evidence at our disposal is very partial and may even be misleading, also because any manifestation of support and consent was given in a context of repression. There is no doubt, however, that the conquest of Ethiopia was greeted with enthusiasm in many political and cultural circles. For example, although Pius XI was secretly against this war, almost all currents of Italian Catholicism supported it as a means of Italy's renewed imperial mission and the expansion of Catholicism in the world⁷⁰. Further research into the reception of Fascist ideology, as well as in the relationships between propaganda and popular culture, is necessary; but it seems probable that imperial discourse strengthened the coalition between Mussolini's government, reactionary currents, monarchists, conservative Catholicism, nationalist circles, and other forces of Fascist Italy. And within this discourse, the myth of labour, the racial stereotypes, and above all the cult of *romanità* appealed to anyone who cherished Italy's imperial dimension, especially during the 1930s⁷¹.

Overall, according to Nicola Labanca, what Fascism called "the rebirth of the empire" represented for Italians a "great and collective, but also transient and diversified emotion"⁷². After the wave of enthusiasm of 1935-36, Italian society lost interest in foreign lands in the following years, while the country's defeat in the Second World War made the colonial conquests completely ephemeral. However, partly for this reason, a sugar-coated image of Italian imperialism persisted in post-Fascist Italy⁷³. As some historical research has shown, after the end of the Fascist empire a new form of nostalgia for the imperial past spread especially among the former settlers who had participated in the colonisation of the 'fourth shore' and Italian East Africa⁷⁴. And often, in the case of post-war Italy, this new form of "imperialist nostalgia" was no longer directed at the distant past of Roman civilisation, but at the much closer experience of Fascist colonialism.

⁷⁰ See Lucia Ceci, *L'interesse superiore. Il Vaticano e l'Italia di Mussolini* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2013), 182.

⁷¹ See Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the *Romanità*", 17-18.

⁷² Labanca, *La guerra d'Etiopia*, 115.

⁷³ For a seminal work on this topic, see Angelo Del Boca, *L'Africa nella coscienza degli italiani. Miti, memorie, errori, sconfitte* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1992).

⁷⁴ See in particular Roberta Pergher, "The consent of memory. Recovering Fascist-settler relations in Libya", in *In the Society of Fascists. Acclamation, Acquiescence, and Agency in Mussolini's Italy*, eds. Giulia Albanese and Roberta Pergher (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 169-188. More generally, for a conceptual problematisation of this topic, see Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia", *Representations* 26 (1989), 107-122.

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