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“A Food Utopia? Italian colonial visions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, 1911-1913”

Or Rosenboim^{1 2}

The past decade has seen a surge in historical studies of food, nutrition and gastronomy, sometimes defined as a ‘culinary turn’.³ In the past, as now, food has been more than a material concern, often carrying important symbolic and conceptual meanings in different societies around the world.⁴ This notion is reflected in a growing historiography exploring a range of themes including the links between food and political, economic and social relations in the context of empire,⁵ the impact of food abundance and scarcity on social and political order,⁶ and

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³ Jeffery M. Pilcher, "The Embodied Imagination in Recent Writings on Food History." *The American Historical Review* 121, 3 (2016): 861-87.

⁴ On symbolism and food see Massimo Montanari, *Il cibo come cultura* (Rome: Laterza, 2007); Rachel B. Herrmann, “No useless Mouth!: Iroquoian food diplomacy in the American Revolution”, *Diplomatic History* 41, 1 (2017), 20-49; Christopher Kissane, *Food, Religion, & Communities in Early Modern Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

⁵ There is a vast literature on imperial food consumption and trade, see for example Lauren Janes, *Colonial Food in Interwar Paris: The Taste of Empire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Rachel Lauden, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2015); Mary A. Procida, “Feeding the Imperial Appetite: Imperial Knowledge and Anglo-Indian Domesticity,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, 2 (2003): 123– 149; Cecilia Leong-Salobir, *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A Taste of Empire* (London: Routledge, 2011); Diana Garvin, *Feeding Fascism: The Politics of Women’s Food Work* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022).

⁶ On the economics of food scarcity see, for example Cormac O Grada, *Famine: A Short History* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2009); Robert William Fogel, *The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death, 1700–2100: Europe, America, and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On the social meaning of food see Alejandro Colás, Jason Edwards, Jane Levi, and Sami Zubaida. *Food, Politics, and Society: Social Theory and the Modern Food System* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018). On environmental history, empire and food see for example Corinna Treitel, *Eating Nature in Modern Germany: Food, Agriculture and Environment, c.1870 to 2000*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), chapter 3.

the role of food in forging national identity and culture in modern times.⁷ Food, and the ways in which people have understood and conceptualized it, reflect political imageries that go beyond material concerns, and often touch upon foundational aspects of identity and order.

This article seeks to interrogate historical intersections of food and political ideas by examining how utopian visions of food plenty were employed in rhetorical narratives in Italy's pre-fascist colonial empire. In Liberal Italy—from Italy's unification in 1861 to the rise of fascism in 1922—images of food plenty sought to justify and promote colonial expansion, and specifically the conquest of the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (later known as Libya) in 1911-1913.⁸ This colonial war was the first significant war fought by unified Italy which contributed to the forging of its national identity and international status.⁹ In comparison with other European states, early twentieth century Italy had a relatively limited imperial experience. Nonetheless, historians have noted that colonial utopias did feature in the public discourse about the potential colonization of the Libyan provinces. As Giuseppe Finaldi has shown, utopian

⁷ The interplay of food and political ideas in early modern Europe is discussed, for example, in Emma Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Melissa Calaresu, "Making and eating ice cream in Naples: rethinking consumption and sociability in the eighteenth century", *Past & Present*, 220 (1): 35-78. On food and modern political identity see for example Massimo Montanari, *Italian Identity in the Kitchen, or Food and the Nation*. Trans. Beth Archer Brombert. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁸ The Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were officially renamed Libya in 1934, when Mussolini united them with a part of the region of Fezzan. In this article I use the modern term 'Libya' to refer to Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. In the past two decades, there has been a surge in scholarship on Italian colonialism in Libya, including Mia Fuller and Ruth Ben-Ghiat (eds.), *Italian colonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2005); Giuseppe Finaldi, *A History of Italian Colonialism, 1860-1907: Europe's Last Empire* (London: Routledge, 2017); Mark Choate "From territorial to ethnographic colonies and back again: The politics of Italian expansion, 1890-1912", *Modern Italy* 8,1 (2003): 65-76; Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002); Angelo Del Boca, "The myths, suppressions, denials and defaults of Italian colonialism", in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 17-36; Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (eds.) *Italian Colonialism* (Bern: Peter Lang UK, 2005); Giovanna Tomasello, *L'Africa tra mito e realtà. Storia della letteratura coloniale italiana* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2004).

⁹ Victoria de Grazia, *The perfect fascist* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2020).

thinking was a widespread means of legitimating Italy's colonial war for Tripoli and Cyrenaica.¹⁰ Hyperbolic descriptions generated a strong sense of nationalistic popular support for the colonial enterprise by highlighting the desirable attributes of the potential African colony and underlining in contrast the social, economic and political shortcomings of Italy.

Ever since Thomas More coined the term 'utopia' in 1516, utopianism has been an important mode of political thought, which includes a wide range of imagined alternative existences, good places and ideal societies, located in a different time or place.¹¹ This article seeks to show the significant role of utopian thinking in shaping Italian colonial ideas. Italian thinkers stripped Libya of its concrete physical features and turned it into a non-place, an imagined space capable of containing their utopian visions. The colonization of Libya, which Italians often depicted as the 'promised land', also influenced the construction of Italian national identity.¹² As this article will show, this conceptual link between utopian imagination, colonization and nationalism emerged clearly in Italian discourses that represented food and agricultural plenty as motivation for conquest.

Food was an important topic in Italian politics at the early twentieth century, as Carol Helstosky has aptly argued. 'Politics shaped Italian diet', she suggested, and culinary choices were a matter of contests for power, rather than individual taste.¹³ For Helstosky, Liberal Italy's history was characterised by an ever-present public debate about food, and the government's limited funds – or ambitions – to tackle poor nutrition and 'monotonous diet' or actively

¹⁰ Giuseppe Finaldi, "Dreaming in the desert: Libya as Italy's promised land, 1911–70" in *Imperial Expectations and Realities: El Dorados, Utopias and Dystopias*, ed. Andrekos Varnava (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 191-209.

¹¹ Thomas More, *Utopia*. Eds. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Fátima Vieira, "The Concept of Utopia". In *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3-27.

¹² Gabriele Proglia, *Libia 1911-1912, Immaginari coloniali e italianità* (Milan: Quaderni di storia, 2016), 128-140.

¹³ Carol Helstosky, *Garlic and Oil: Politics and Food in Italy* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 2.

intervene in public consumption habits. Food – or rather its absence or scarcity – remained one of the central issues of Italian politics during this era: ‘the most immediate and visceral element linking Italians together in the liberal period was diet’.¹⁴ By the early twentieth century, there was a clear improvement in the quality and range of foods available to the Italians, due to both industrial development and political interventions, yet the notion that Italian ate badly and insufficiently still held strong. This, I argue, rendered colonial food utopias particularly appetizing for the Italian public and governing elites alike.

Historians of the fascist era have recognized the role of utopian thinking—including aspects of food plenty—in shaping Italian imperial thought, but have not examined similar themes in earlier periods, thus undermining potential continuities in Italian political thought. Charles Burdett analyses the role of utopianism in fascist Italy’s empire, to argue that fascism enacted in Libya its ‘revolutionary utopianism’, seeking to build an ideal society through aggressive expansion.¹⁵ For Burdett, the fascist utopian imperialism sought to establish ‘an entirely new kind of society and indeed a new kind of civilization’, not merely to enhance Italy’s international prestige.¹⁶ Yet, Burdett does not account for earlier colonial utopias, nor for the role of food and agricultural abundance as generators of Italian utopian colonial visions similarly concerned with transforming Italian national identity and the international order alike. In this sense, his scholarship on Italian utopianism is an invitation to explore the earlier iterations of these ideas—albeit incomplete or less sophisticated—in the pre-fascist era.

¹⁴ Ibid, 14.

¹⁵ Charles Burdett, “Italian Fascism, Messianic Eschatology and the Representation of Libya”, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 11:1 (2010): 3-25; Charles Burdett, “Italian Fascism and Utopia” *History of the Human Sciences* 16, 1 (2003): 93–108.

¹⁶ Burdett, “Italian Fascism, Messianic Eschatology and the Representation of Libya”, 9; Labanca, *Oltremare*, 137–141

The ‘colonial cuisine’ of the 1930s represented for Emanuela Scarpellini the ‘contrast between the Italy of the time, poor and austere, forced to espouse self-sufficiency, and the Italy of the future, rich, powerful and outward-looking thanks to its empire’.¹⁷ She argues that the fascist regime produced an imagery of plenty in which food played a central role, where the consumption of products considered ‘exotic’ such as bananas or ‘luxurious’ such as liquorice and coffee served to propagate imperialist ideologies of violence and conquest.¹⁸ Stereotypical images of African landscapes, women and produce was used to market colonial imports, maintaining a clear distinction between the local and the Italian populations. While Scarpellini convincingly argues that the ‘colonial cuisine’ was an important political tool in the formation of the fascist vision of world order, her analysis does not engage with earlier Italian representations of food as a justification for imperial conquest or as an expression of ideas about the international realm. Going back to Liberal Italy’s narratives of colonial food utopias is, therefore, fundamental for understanding the nexus of empire and food in Italian twentieth century international thought.

This article focuses on the contribution of journalists to thinking about empire and food in the early twentieth century to widen our understanding of who counts as a political thinker. Debates about colonialism in Liberal Italy were not limited to the spheres of politics and civil service and captured the imagination of many Italian literary figures as well.¹⁹ In this cultural and political context, historians have shown that journalists became producers of utopian political

¹⁷ Emanuela Scarpellini, *Food and Foodways in Italy from 1861 to the Present*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 90.

¹⁸ See also Diana Garvin, “The Italian Coffee Triangle: From Brazilian Colonos to Ethiopian Colonialists.” *Modern Italy* 26, 3 (2021): 291–312.

¹⁹ Antonio Schiavulli (ed.), *La Guerra lirica: il dibattito dei letterati italiani sull’impresa di Libia (1911-1912)*, (Ravenna: Giorgio Pozzi, 2009).

visions of colonial international order.²⁰ They also played a significant role in setting in motion the press campaign in favour of colonization which, historians have suggested, contributed to triggering the outbreak of the Italo-Turkish War in 1911-1912.²¹ Yet, the ways in which Italian journalists have employed food-related images to sustain their colonial rhetoric remain unexplored. These images, alongside their political and conceptual implications and contradictions, are at the core of this study.

The protagonists of this study, Enrico Corradini, Giuseppe Bevione and Arnaldo Fraccaroli, were prominent journalists for leading Italian newspapers who recounted their experiences of visiting Libya in articles that were later republished as books. All three saw themselves as ‘public intellectuals’, aiming to influence public opinion and policy-makers through their writings for *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa* which sold hundreds of thousands of copies daily, and the successful weekly publication *Illustrazione italiana*. Despite their different political and social positions, Corradini, Bevione and Fraccaroli shared a view of the Libyan landscape as a utopia of food plenty.²² All three considered their utopian visions – characterized by ambivalence and vagueness as well as by a hierarchical view of race and civilization – to be a sufficient motivation for the violent military colonization of the region by the Italian nation-state.

²⁰ Claudio G. Segre, *Fourth Shore: The Italian Colonization of Libya* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1974), chap. 1.

²¹ Nicola Labanca, *La Guerra Italiana per La Libia, 1911-1931* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012); Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1986); Timothy W. Childs, *Italo-Turkish Diplomacy and the War Over Libya, 1911-1912* (Netherlands: Brill, 1990) chap. 2.

²² On related ideas in 16th-17th century English thought see Samuel Garrett Zeitlin, “Francis Bacon on Imperial and Colonial Warfare.” *The Review of Politics*, 83, 2 (2021): 196–218.

The Florentine activist and journalist Corradini was an influential theorist of Italian nationalism who emphasised the need of imperial expansion for Italy's national revival.²³ He founded Italy's nationalist association in 1910, and after the First World War became a leading fascist ideologue.²⁴ Bevione was known for his reportages from Argentina for the Turin-based newspaper *La Stampa*, where he decried the troubles facing Italian emigrants. Like Corradini, he saw Libya as a potential outlet for Italian emigration, and built on his experience there to advance his political career as a senator.²⁵ Fraccaroli, a successful writer of novels and plays, represents a different mode of journalistic style characterised by an entertaining tone and colourful reportage. During his lifetime, he was celebrated as Italy's major cultural journalist and credited for coining the term 'la dolce vita' which became a hallmark of Italian culture.²⁶ Through the different thematic lenses of nationalism, emigration or popular culture, each of these journalists attempted in his own way to address the challenges of Italy's national identity and international role. For all of them, the answer was closely linked to the establishment of prosperous, fertile and abundant agricultural settlement in Italian colonies in Libya.

The analysis of Italian colonial food utopias, especially in journalistic writings of the Liberal period, makes a contribution to the history of ideas for several reasons. First, the article uses the concept of utopia to shed light on the specific role of arguments about food plenty as

²³ Joanna Sondel-Cedarmas and Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves. "Imperialism, War and Emigration in Enrico Corradini and the Ideology of Italian Nationalism (1896-1912)." *Politeja*, 10, 1 (2008): 109–26.

Jonathan McCollum, "Reimagining Mediterranean Spaces: Libya and the Italo-Turkish War, 1911-1912", *Diacronie*, 23, 3 (2015) (online).

²⁴ Gregor, A. James. *Mussolini's Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Chap. 2; Mauro Marsella, "Enrico Corradini's Italian nationalism: the 'right wing' of the fascist synthesis", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9:2, (2004) 203-224;

²⁵ Schiavulli, *La Guerra lirica*.

²⁶ Arnaldo Fraccaroli, *La Dolce Vita* (Milan, Garzanti, 1922).

justifications of colonial conquest.²⁷ As Lucia Re has noted, ‘Libya was a literary construct for Italians, a socially symbolic narrative act of wish-fulfillment’.²⁸ As this article shows, writing about food in the colonial context was, therefore, a way to express a political desire.²⁹ Utopian visions about the colonization of Libya sought to capture the social imagination of the Italians through familiar food-related imageries, in a period when hunger, emigration, internal migration and pre-industrial agriculture still characterized large parts of the country.³⁰ Thus, images of food plenty were seen as particularly effective in generating support for a transformation of Italy into a colonial power in the Mediterranean.

Second, the article discusses the particular focus of these food utopias on agricultural plenty, placing them in a longer tradition of colonial agricultural utopias. As Roberta Biasillo has shown, in the Fascist period, agricultural production played an important role in shaping the Libyan colonies and targeting potential Italian settlers there.³¹ This study proposes that agriculture-based food imageries were significant for colonial thinking already in the Liberal, pre-fascist period, when the article’s protagonists linked immediate personal bodily desires to large-scale international imperial projects. While such arguments existed in other imperial contexts in earlier periods – as we shall see mostly up to the industrialisation of the mid-nineteenth century – in Italy’s predominantly agrarian economy they retained a lasting relevance well into the twentieth century. Thus, Italian interpretations of colonial utopias distinctively

²⁷ On the concept of utopia see Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010); Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The imaginary reconstruction of society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²⁸ Lucia Re, “Italians and the Invention of Race: The Poetics and Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya, 1890-1913”, *California Italian Studies*, 1,1 (2010): 5.

²⁹ On utopianism and political action compare Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 2020), 18.

³⁰ Stefano Gallo, “Riempire l’Italia: Le migrazioni nei progetti di colonizzazione interna, 1868-1910.” *Meridiana*, 75 (2012): 59–83.

³¹ Roberta Biasillo, “Socio-Ecological Colonial Transfers: Trajectories of the Fascist Agricultural Enterprise in Libya (1922–43).” *Modern Italy* 26, 2 (2021): 181–98

prioritized food and agricultural abundance over commercial, industrial or strategic benefits as colonial justifications.

Third, the Italian journalists charged the state – rather than individuals or private companies – with the transformation of the international order through settler colonialism.³² The a call for state-led political action to establish colonies in North Africa which would provide Italy access to food plenty thus became a test for the Italian state, its national identity and international standing. I argue that in Liberal Italy, arguments in favour of colonization embodied a degree of ambivalence about Italy’s capacity to undertake the project, and in general to ‘civilize’ the local population. This ambivalence was also expressed in claims about hierarchies of race and civilization and Italy’s own position within them, which are another distinctive aspect of Italian colonial thought at the time. Such ambivalence did not, however, limit the violence and exploitation that the utopian colonial project implied in both theory and practice.

1. Italian imaginaries of Libya

Journalists enjoyed a privileged position in Liberal Italy, as newspapers reached an ever-growing and increasingly educated audience. Historians have shown that journalists had used their platform not only to inform the public but also to influence opinions on the desirability of the colonization of Libya, mounting an effective campaign in favour of conquest.³³ Members

³² On Italian settler colonialism after 1922 see, for example, Roberta Pergher, *Mussolini's Nation-Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Rhiannon Noel Welch, *Vital Subjects* (Oxford: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

³³ Roberta Viola, “La guerra di Libia nella percezione dell’opinione pubblica italiana,” in *Mare Nostrum: Percezione ottomana e mito mediterraneo in Italia all’alba del ‘900*, ed. Stefano Trinchese (Milan: Guerini Studio, 2005), 39-52; Marcella Pincherle, “La preparazione dell’opinione pubblica all’impresa di Libia,” in *Rassegna*

of the literary elite, including journalists, poets, philosophers and scholars, travelled to the Ottoman provinces as foreign correspondents, producing texts that often mixed fact-based reportage and personal opinion.³⁴ The article explores the ideas of Giuseppe Bevione, Enrico Corradini and Arnaldo Fraccaroli, who visited Libya as journalists in 1911-13, before or during the Italo-Turkish War. For them, reporting from North Africa was an opportunity to distinguish themselves professionally as well as a chance to influence public opinion. Despite their political and professional differences, all three produced an image of Libya as an utopian land of food plenty, which Italy should conquer, modernize and rule.

Enrico Corradini (1865-1931) published in 1911 *L'Ora di Tripoli*, a collection of his newspaper articles based on his visit to Tripoltania and Cyrenaica in June-August 1911. Writing before the outbreak of the war, which started in October of the same year, his articles stood out for promoting his nationalistic campaign for Italian imperial expansion.³⁵ A leading nationalist ideologue, journalist and political activist, he co-founded in 1910 the Italian Nationalist Association (associazione nazionalista italiana), decried the national, social, economic and political backwardness of Italy, and envisioned its revival through territorial expansionism.³⁶ He saw emigration as an important threat for Italy's national identity and international status, and endorsed colonialism as a means to redirect emigration from the Americas to Italian settler

storica del Risorgimento (1969): 450-482; Paolo Maltese, *La terra promessa. La guerra italo-turca e la conquista della Libia 1911-1912* (Milan: Sugar, 1968).

³⁴ Isabella Nardi, "L'Effetto Libia" nella letteratura e nel giornalismo del primo Novecento", in *La grande illusione: opinione pubblica e mass media al tempo della guerra di Libia*, ed. Isabella Nardi e Sandro Gentili (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2009).

³⁵ Enrico Corradini, *L'Ora di Tripoli* (Milan, Treves, 1911). On Corradini's nationalism see Simon Levis Sullam. "Dal 'Marzocco' a Tripoli: la nazione di Corradini e la crisi dell'Italia liberale." In *Italiani in Guerra: dalla presa di Roma alla Settimana rossa, 1870-1914*, eds. Simon Levis Sullam and Mario Isnenghi (Turin: UTET, 2009), vol. 2, pp. 676-687.

³⁶ Cfr. Schiavulli, *La guerra libica*; Proglorio, *Libia 1911-1912*.

colonies in Libya.³⁷ Corradini's nationalist vision, which merged social Darwinism with conservative militarism, would later inspire Mussolini to develop fascism as an imperial, militant and nationalistic creed.³⁸

In his writings from Libya, Corradini proposed a vision of food utopia, which the Italian colonisers would have the right—and duty—to use. This vision emerged from his interpretation of the sights he had seen during his stay, but might have also been influenced by the views of his guides and interlocutors in Libya. When he visited Tripoli, he was shown around the city's market by members of the local Dante Alighieri Society, who informed him about the fertility of Tripoli's soil.³⁹ The Dante Alighieri Society, an association founded in 1889 to advance Italian culture, language, and national interests internationally, operated branches in many countries around the world. From its conception, the Society sought to envisage a 'Greater Italy', that could be fostered by sustained links between Italian volunteers and Italian diasporic communities abroad. In this framework, in the second decade of the twentieth century, members of the Society also supported proposals for territorial expansion and colonization and later endorsed Italy's intervention in the First World War.⁴⁰

As the informal representatives of Italian interests in Tripoli, the Dante Alighieri Society would have been in perfect position to introduce the city to visitors such as Corradini, and to engage them in debates about the desirability of the Italian colonization of the region.⁴¹ Before visiting Libya, Corradini had already forged relations with the Dante society that sponsored his

³⁷ Tullio Pagano, "From Diaspora to Empire: Enrico Corradini's Nationalist Novels." *MLN* 119, 1 (2004): 67-83.

³⁸ Marsella, "Enrico Corradini's Italian Nationalism"; Gregor A. James. *Mussolini's Intellectuals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), chapter 1; Sondel-Cedarmas and Pietrzyk-Reeves, "Imperialism, War and Emigration", 109-15.

³⁹ Corradini, *L'ora di Tripoli*, 71.

⁴⁰ Beatrice Pisa, *Nazione e politica nella società «Dante Alighieri»*, (Rome: Bonacci, 1995), 299-303.

⁴¹ Pamela Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made: Decolonization and the Foundation of Postwar Italy*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 28–42. See also Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 300.

conferences during his travels to Italian diasporic communities, such as Tunisia and South America. His ideas about the expansion of the Italian nation-state aligned well with the Society's agenda, and in Tripoli he seemed to accept his guides' arguments about the fertility of the land and the abundance of its agricultural produce.

Corradini also visited the luxurious villa of the Jewish Nahum family in Tripoli, and surveyed its gardens. As Renzo de Felice has shown, members of the family were among Libya's high-society Westernized mercantile milieu, and were part of the governing board of the local committee of the Dante Alighieri Society and the governing board of the Banco di Napoli, an Italian bank in Tripoli.⁴² Possibly, already before the Italian invasion had begun, the Nahum family, with its extensive connections to Italian culture and institutions, had favoured the Italian colonization of Libya, and sought to convince the journalist of its advantages.⁴³ After the Italian occupation, members of the Nahum family, such as the merchant Halfalla Nahum, would take on leadership roles and become important interlocutors between the new rulers and the local Jewish community.⁴⁴ In their garden, Corradini learnt that 'vegetables could be harvested twice a year, in January-February as well as June-July, that the watermelons attained an extraordinary size, and that citrus fruit was exported even to Sicily.'⁴⁵

Corradini advanced the view that the desert was naturally fertile, without attributing the cultivation know-how to local farmers. He was impressed by the produce he saw in local

⁴² See Piera Rossetto, 'We Were all Italian!': The construction of a 'sense of Italianness' among Jews from Libya (1920s–1960s)', *History and Anthropology* (online) 2021.

⁴³ See Maurice Roumani, 'Nahum, Halfallah', in *Encyclopaedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, edited by Norman A. Stillman (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2010), vol. III, 549-550.

⁴⁴ Renzo de Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1978), 65.

⁴⁵ 'Mi dissero che gli ortaggi ci fanno due volte all'anno, nel gennaio febbraio e nel giugno-luglio; e che i cocomeri giungono a straordinaria grossezza e che si esportano agrumi fin anche per la Sicilia.' Corradini, *L'ora di Tripoli*, 71 (all translations mine.)

gardens, such as ‘vineyards with beautiful grapes, palms, figs, quinces, great rose gardens, jasmine, oleanders, mulberry, olives, corn,’ but also by the uncultivated natural landscape.⁴⁶ In addition, local plants seemed particularly healthy, in implicit contrast to the European vine that, in those years, suffered an infection of the phylloxera insect.

For Corradini, the Libyan territories provided abundant, healthy and fertile land for agriculture that Italians should take over:

The gardens are in the middle of the desert. There is a greenhouse of plants. Green, magnificent mulberry. Vine with stupendous bunches. No disease. One should see how the desert arena would be when cultivated! Olives, apples. Under the plants the soil transfigures into compact land, grassy, excellent. It is a reddish soil, very fine, without any rocks. What great olive trees, unpruned, wild, loaded with olives! [...] But what desert! We are in the promised land. There is no disease in the vineyard: the leaf is pure, clean, without bubbles, never dry, very green.⁴⁷

Corradini’s stay in Libya in 1911 generated an ambivalent view of the state of the local ‘civilization’: was it in need of modernization or not? If the local lemons and oranges were exported to Sicily, what need was there for an Italian ‘civilizing’ intervention? Between the lines, other ambiguities emerged. Travelling between desert oases, Corradini saw flourishing pastures and caravans carrying bags of flour, protected by armed guards, yet he did not credit the local population with the skills that such production implied. Instead, when Corradini referred to the

⁴⁶ ‘Una foresta di viti con uva bellissima, di palme, fichi; meli cotogni, grandiosi rosai, gelsomini, oleandri, gelsi, olivi, granturco’, Ibid, 72.

⁴⁷ ‘I giardini sono in mezzo al deserto. C’è un vivaio di piante. Gelsi vegeti, verdissimi, magnifici. Viti con grappoli stupendi;. Nessuna malattia. Bisogna vedere come l’arena del deserto diventa, quando si coltiva! Olivi, meli. Sotto le piante si vede la trasfigurazione dell’arena in terreno compatto, erboso, eccellente. [...] E’ un terreno rossiccio, finissimo, senza sassi di sorta. Che olive folte, cupi, non potati selvosi, carichi di olive! Viti atterrate dal peso de’ grappoli. Altro che deserto! Siamo in terra promessa. Non c’è una malattia nelle viti: il pampino è puro, lindo, senza bolle, mai secco, verdissimo.’ Ibid, 73-4.

local inhabitants of the Ottoman provinces, it was to advance a dystopian vision of human community living among a fertile food utopia. He praised the land's fertility and worthiness, yet underlined the local population's incapacity to cultivate it properly, reflecting a continuity with earlier utopian interpretations of potential colonies.

Colonial food utopias, such as the one advanced by Corradini, implied a particular relationship between humans and their natural environment, as well as between different communities. The notion that property rights on the land depended on its proper 'use' echoes More's *Utopia*, where inability to exploit the land's natural fertility relinquishes any right of ownership. More argued that

..if the natives refuse to conform themselves to their laws they drive them out of those bounds which they mark out for themselves, and use force if they resist, for they account it a very just cause of war for a nation to hinder others from possessing a part of that soil of which they make no use, but which is suffered to lie idle and uncultivated, since every man has, by the law of nature, a right to such a waste portion of the earth as is necessary for his subsistence.⁴⁸

In More's social and political critique, private property was excluded in favour of the common good. While such ideas did not belong in Corradini's vision, he did share the notion that using the land for the common good, by enhancing its fertility and productivity, could in principle trump competing private property claims. The passivity attributed to the local population becomes part of Corradini's colonial vision of a utopian space awaiting Italian colonisation and settlement.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ More, *Utopia*, section 7.

⁴⁹ For similar ideas about development in West Africa see Joseph Morgan Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

The contrast between natural plenty and civilizational decline (which led to loss of property rights) also appeared in the accounts of early modern European travellers to the Mediterranean region. There, they also saw agricultural abundance that some local populations failed to put to good usage. Thus for example, Algiers was described as the ‘granary of Europe’, which could supply the continent with plentiful resources thanks to easy trade routes.⁵⁰ Yet in his *Histoire des Deux Indes* (1770), Guillaume Thomas François Raynal claimed that the French would bring civilization to ‘Barbary’ by introducing modern agriculture to produce food and raw material for Europe.⁵¹ Such ideas, while not amounting to a call for conquest, reflected perceptions of North Africa as particularly fertile and abundant, and therefore deserving of the political attention of Europeans who, as ‘modern’ and ‘civilized’ could exploit the land’s potential and had the right to benefit from its fruits. In these accounts, the native population was frequently depicted as hungry, poor, unskilled and uncivilized – at times even morally deprived – suggesting they should be replaced by ‘civilized’ colonizers. As Ann Thomson has shown in regard to French visitors to North Africa, knowledge of the local cultures and costumes did not prevent the ‘strengthening of the most bigoted Christian stereotypes, accompanied by general ignorance and a refusal to understand’.⁵²

In the nineteenth century, similar ideas were also expressed by Italian travellers to North Africa. Filippo Pananti wrote in 1817 that ‘the terrain is fertile but the agriculture is neglected. Half of the land is uncultivated for lack of inhabitants [...] the gardens are full of fruit trees, but without taste or symmetry. They do not know how to produce proper oil even if they make a lot

⁵⁰ Ann Thomson, *Barbary and enlightenment: European attitudes towards the Maghreb in the 18th century*. (Netherlands: Brill, 1987), 137.

⁵¹ Corradini, *L’ora di Tripoli*, 135

⁵² *Ibid.*, 31.

of it, letting the olive trees grow without pruning.’⁵³ Pananti suggested that the local population’s lack of essential knowledge undermined the extraction of the land’s full potential, but did not argue that they actively ruined it, or that they should be replaced by Europeans.

Only later in the nineteenth century, European visitors to North Africa would directly accuse the local populations of actively ruining the land, generating a stronger justification for conquest. For Diana K. Davis, this ‘colonial environmental narrative’ focused on the ‘innate fertility of the land and its waste by the Algerians and their ‘primitive’ agricultural methods’.⁵⁴ Thus, visions of food utopias generated not only an invitation to enjoy the land’s plenty, but also an accusation against those – the supposedly uncivilized locals – who caused its decline. At the very least, colonial utopias of food plenty typically regarded the local population as passive or politically irrelevant. For C. A. Bayly, the urge to colonize and modernize fertile – yet supposedly neglected or wasted – lands was linked to visions of ‘agrarian patriotism’ which sought to provide unemployed farmers and individual entrepreneurs in Britain with an outlet for economic profit abroad.⁵⁵ Ironically, in 1808, a Scottish writer proposed the British informal colonization of Sicily to exploit the island’s natural abundance:

Hemp grows in abundance in Sicily, and there are vast tracts of low and rich lands yet waste, where the culture might be extended with success. As yet, however, it is produced only in proportion to the demand; but there is no doubt that were that increased (sic) and

⁵³ ‘Il terreno è fertile, ma è trascurata l’agricoltura. Meta delle terre e’ incolta per mancanza di abitanti... I giardini sono pieni d’alberi fruttigeri, ma senza gusto e simmetria. Non sanno far bene l’olio sebben ne facciamo moltissimo, lascian crescer gli ulivi senza potarli.’ Filippo Pananti, *Avventure ed osservazioni di Filippo Pananti sopra le coste di Barberia*. (Florence: Leonardo Ciardetti, 1817), 318-319; Ann Thomson, “Filippo Pananti’s Algeria”, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 26:2 (2021): 116-128.

⁵⁴ Diana K. Davis, *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome: Environmental History and French Colonial Expansion in North Africa* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 52. See also Alice Louise Conklin, *A mission to civilize: Ideology and imperialism in French West Africa, 1895-1930*. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1989).

⁵⁵ C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780-1830*. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 121.

the difficulties of exportation lessened, at the same time that the peasantry should be better treated and encouraged, that Sicily might render us less dependent on Russia, for the supply of that commodity. Sweet oil, both coarse and fine, as abundantly produced in Sicily. Raisins, figs, pistachios, almonds, rice, Indian corn, flax, guinea corn, soda and even sugar cane flourish here. [...] timber is still abundant in some parts, but the woods are neglected and destroyed, partly from ignorance, partly from bad policy, and erroneous system of forest laws.⁵⁶

In this view, although agricultural colonial settlements were a response to demographic pressures at home, they depended on private initiative. Corradini offered a different interpretation of this well-used colonial trope: he was advocating the state-led creation of Italian settler colonies to improve agricultural cultivation. His descriptions still contrasted images of the local population as hungry, poor and degraded into bestiality with the positive descriptions of the fertile soil and its abundant agricultural production, continuing the line of argument previously used by Pananti and other European travellers to North Africa. Yet his emphasis on state-led colonial intervention represented a novel element in Italian thinking about North Africa. He continued to see, like his nineteenth century predecessors, the North African territories as ‘places unique in the world for their beauty and their misery’, which he contrasted to the local people, who seemed as ‘human waste’.⁵⁷ He intentionally focused his attention on those inhabitants who did not farm: the mountain and city dwellers. Those who lived in the mountains were particularly pitiful, unable to cultivate their own food: ‘a human herd with their mouths all green for all the

⁵⁶ Francis Gould Leckie, *An Historical Survey of the Foreign Affairs of Great Britain, with a View to Explain the Causes of the Disasters of the Late and Present Wars*. (London: J. Bell, 1808), 56.

⁵⁷ ‘Luoghi unici al mondo per la loro bellezza e per la loro miseria’. Corradini, *L'ora di Tripoli*, 70.

grass they devoured.’⁵⁸ In the city, he described how hungry local children called to him in Italian: ‘for the Holy Lord, we haven’t eaten, long live Italy, long live the King, long live the Statute, give me a penny!’⁵⁹ The pledges of the poor – if we consider Corradini’s reports as accurate – also indicated that their hopes were directed not towards private enterprises or individuals, but towards the foundational elements of the Italian state: the king and the constitution. For Corradini, unlocking the agricultural fertility of Libya’s territory required the active intervention of the Italian state.

In addition to his arguments about the degraded state of the local population, Corradini advanced claims about their isolation from other societies, which for him demonstrated a lower state of civilization in comparison with the interconnected European societies. The local population was a ‘primitive people cut off from the human consortium,’ suggesting that for Corradini, international communication and trade were essential attributes of civilization that lacked in Tripolitania.⁶⁰ While Tunisia and Egypt could be considered ‘civilized’, Tripoli was ‘a country alone in the world, like a wild territory, yet undiscovered.’⁶¹ If Tripoli remained outside the interconnected sphere of civilization, it was doomed to live ‘with the failing means of subsistence provided by solitude.’ In their current state, he argued, the ‘indigenous are less than a people’.⁶²

⁵⁸ ‘Rifiuto umano’; ‘una mandria umana con le bocche tutte verdi per l’erba divorata’. Ibid, 70.

⁵⁹ ‘Per Dio santo, non ho mangiato, viva l’Italia, viva il Re, viva lo statuto, dammi un soldo!’ Ibid, 68. The ‘statuto’ that Corradini mentions is the constitution of the Kingdom of Italy, first granted by King Carlo Alberto in 1848 and later adopted by unified Italy and remained in place until 1948. The statute limited the power of the monarchy and outlined the political rights and duties of the citizens.

⁶⁰ ‘Popolo primitivo segregato dal consorzio umano’. Corradini, *L’Ora di Tripoli*, 75.

⁶¹ ‘Un paese solo nel mondo come una plaga selvaggia, non ancora scoperta’. Ibid.

⁶² ‘Vi si vive soltanto con i mezzi di sussistenza fallaci che da’ la solitudine. Gli indigeni sono meno di un popolo’. Ibid.

Civilizational hierarchies played a prominent role in the colonial utopian rhetoric, despite lack of clarity about the meaning of ‘civilization’ itself.⁶³ Rather than describing any particular skill or technology that Italy would introduce to Libya after its colonization, Corradini highlighted the need for Italy to forge connections between these Ottoman provinces and the rest of the world. These connections, importantly, were not necessarily voluntary, but could be established through conquest and domination. Corradini’s call to insert the ‘indigenous’ into the ‘family of civilization’ reflects a hierarchical and exclusionary – rather than global and inclusive – conception of international order. It assumed an inherent hierarchy based on agricultural capabilities where Italy was superior to the local population and therefore could – and morally should – provide the expert skills to modernise North African agriculture and insert Libya into the ‘human consortium’. By turning a place of ‘solitude’ and desolation into a thriving land of plenty, Italy could transform the international order and expand the space of human civilization itself.

Giuseppe Bevione (1879-1976) spent 1911 and 1912 in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica as the foreign correspondent of one of Italy’s leading newspapers, the Turin-based *La Stampa*. After returning from a lengthy journey in Argentina, which generated dispatches decrying the supposedly negative state of Italian emigrants, he was sent to Libya in the spring of 1911. His articles from Libya favoured Italian colonisation and depicted a positive image of Tripoli as a land of plenty and abundance.⁶⁴ Like Corradini, Bevione advanced the view of Libya as a plentiful utopia, and in his terms, ‘the promised land’ of the Italians.⁶⁵

⁶³ On the notion of civilization see Brett Bowden, *The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Conklin, *A mission to civilize*.

⁶⁴ Giuseppe Sircana, ‘Bevione, Giuseppe’, *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 34, (1988).

⁶⁵ ‘La terra promessa’. Giuseppe Bevione, ‘La volontà d’agire’, in *La Stampa*, 21 August 1911.

Bevione's descriptions of the agricultural plenty of Tripoli and Derna echoed the Italian myth of "Cuccagna", an imagined country where food was freely available. The land of Cuccagna (also described in Boccaccio's *Decameron* as *il paese di Bengodi*), was a place whose landscape was made of desirable cooked and processed food such as wine, meat, cheese, and pasta, and the folkloristic myth was often accompanied by visual maps of the country, showing how its inhabitants enjoyed the abundance of food without needing to earn it through labour.⁶⁶ Cuccagna's utopia maintained its popular appeal over time, since Italians still suffered hunger, monotonous diets and poverty well into the twentieth century, and became intertwined with Italian colonial imaginary.⁶⁷ In the nineteenth century, difficult living conditions pushed millions of Italians to emigrate, Cuccagna became associated with a specific place, the United States, which promises fertile land and abundant food as the 'breadbasket to the world'.⁶⁸ Colonial narratives have long represented North America as a utopian land of plenty. For example, a seventeenth century writer argued that 'the mildnesse of the aire, the fertilities of the soile, and the situation of the rivers are so propitious to the nature and the use of man as no place is more convenient for pleasure, profit and man[']s sustenance'.⁶⁹ Historians have shown that colonial travel narratives 'served up a cornucopia of American fruit, fish, and game to a European readership hungry for the exotic and for profit'.⁷⁰ These accounts were often characterised by a

⁶⁶ Luisa Del Giudice, "Mountains of Cheese and Rivers of Wine: Paesi di Cuccagna and Other Gastronomic Utopias." In *Imagined States: Nationalism, Utopia, and Longing in Oral Cultures*, eds. Luisa Del Giudice and Gerald Porter (Logan, Utah: University Press of Colorado, 2001), 11-63. See also Piero Camporesi, *Il pane selvaggio*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980); Karma Lochrie, *Nowhere in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 49-88.

⁶⁷ Scarpellini, *Food and Foodways*, chapter 3.

⁶⁸ On American visions of Cockaigne, compare to Lyman Tower Sargent, "The American Cockaigne from the Sixteenth Century to the Shmoo and Beyond." *Utopian Studies* 26, 1 (2015): 19-40. Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of Empire: How Britain's Quest for Food Shaped the Modern World*. (United States: Basic Books, 2017); Etta M. Madden and Martha L. Finch, eds. *Eating in Eden: Food and American Utopias*. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), x.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Madden and Finch, *Eating in Eden*, 5.

⁷⁰ Madden and Finch, *Eating in Eden*, 7.

tendency to hyperbolic exaggeration. Colonial food utopias were ‘an elaborate lie, a fiction not to be taken too seriously,’ aimed as a ‘sales pitch’ for a better life than in the country of origins, or to ‘justify imperial and colonial projects’.⁷¹ The food-related discourse on Libya, therefore, continued these associations of plentiful emigration destinations, redirecting the collective imaginary away from the Americas, and on towards the North African provinces.

While he did not invoke Cuccagna directly, Bevione’s descriptions implicitly drew on the shared imaginary of food plenty associated in Italy with this myth. Yet, unlike the common depiction of Cuccagna as a land made of cooked food, he emphasised agricultural plenty.⁷² In that way he sought perhaps to charge his vision with credibility, replicating the attractiveness of the mythical land of plenty without embracing its more fantastical features, or addressed directly the demographic group destined for settling in the new colony: farmers and peasants. For him, as for Corradini, this abundance meant that Tripoli was ‘the promised land’ that could feed Italy’s poor. Colonisation could, therefore, resolve Italy’s so-called ‘emigration problem’ by absorbing the masses of poor *mezzogiorno* peasants that would have otherwise settled in the United States or South America.⁷³

Like Corradini, Bevione also visited the gardens of the wealthy Jewish Nahum family, where he found ‘figs, almonds, olives, oranges, lemons, full of leaves and burdened by vegetal power. In the internal courts there were clover, grain and barley, broad beans and tomatoes growing green with happy energy’.⁷⁴ Bevione found marks of fertility not only in the cultivated

⁷¹ Del Giudice, “Mountains of Cheese”, 49; See also Lyman Tower Sargent, “Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias”. In *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 200-222; Andrekos Varnava, “El Dorados, utopias and dystopias in imperialism and colonial settlement” in *Imperial Expectations and Realities*, 14.

⁷² Del Giudice, “Mountains of Cheese”, 13-14.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁷⁴ ‘Presso i muri sono piantati fichi, mandorli, ulivi, aranci, limoni, densi di fogliame, traboccanti di forza vegetativa. Nei quadri interni un alto trifoglio, grano ed orzo, fave e pomodori verdeggiano con lieta energia’. Giuseppe Bevione, *Come siamo andati a Tripoli* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1912), 13.

gardens but also in the natural landscape, yet whereas the credit for the cultivation of the gardens was associated with particular people (importantly, Jewish and not Arab), the abundance of the ‘oasis of Tripoli’ is represented as detached from human action:

The date palm is the father-tree of the floridity of North Africa. It is the indicator of the presence of water in shallow and the essential living condition of the most fragile vegetation. Its copious shade allows grain to grow and flourish. The oasis of Tripoli, they say, possesses over two million palms. I don’t know if this huge number is correct. Sure, you need to turn your eyes to the sea to avoid limiting your gaze by countless vertical stems, that open wide in the transparent air the fans of their leaves. In this Tripoli plane, this is the surest sign of fertility.⁷⁵

Even in his description of the city of Derna in Cyrenaica, Bevione used a fable-like hyperbolic rhetoric, affirming for example that streams of water dressed the city in ‘green so strong and dark that it seemed exaggerated.’⁷⁶ Palms, olives, figs, almonds, apricots, oranges, bergamots, and bananas filled the gardens ‘like a generous wine overflowing from the glass’s rim.’⁷⁷ Bevione described simple foodstuff, but of extraordinary size or quantity, which was superior to European kinds:

The valleys of the mountains and all the infinite plain in Tripolitania and in Cyrenaica, until the desert, are of an incomparable exuberance. I’ve seen mulberries big as beech trees, olives more colossal than oaks, the grass can be cut more than a dozen times a year.

⁷⁵ ‘La palma da datteri è l’albero padre della floridezza nord-africana. E’ l’indice della presenza dell’acqua a poca profondità e la condizione essenziale di vita per la vegetazione più fragile. La sua ombra copiosa permette al cereale di nascere e fruttificare. L’oasi di Tripoli, dicono, possiede due milioni di palme. Non so se la cifra enorme sia esatta. Certo, bisogna volgere gli occhi al mare, per non avere lo sguardo limitato dagli innumerevoli fusti verticali, che spalancano nell’aria trasparente i ventagli del loro fogliame. E’ questo nella pianura tripolina il segno più certo della fertilità’. Ibid, 13.

⁷⁶ ‘Si sono vestite di un verde così forte, così cupo da sembrar esagerato’. Bevione, *Come siamo andati a Tripoli*, 63.

⁷⁷ ‘Come un vino generoso fuori dagli orli del bicchiere’, ibid.

The fruit trees develop spectacularly. The grain and the corn give, on average years, three or four times the yield of Europe's best terrains, cultivated rationally. The barley is the best known, and it is hoarded by England for its beer. The beasts prosper and even in today's shocking abandonment hundreds of thousands of heads are exported to Malta or Egypt. The vine gives grapples of two or three kilos each. The melons grow in incredible size, twenty to thirty kilos per fruit. The dates are the sweetest that Africa produces.⁷⁸

The inflated descriptions of agricultural fertility were weaved into the claim that only Italians, and not the locals, were able to extract out of the land its full potential.⁷⁹ In Derna, Bevione saw vast green, fertile lands with 'frequent and very clear signs of the presence and abundance of water' which, he implicitly suggested, the local population were unable to cultivate properly, thus ignoring signs of human-made irrigation or labour that would have undermined his imperial vision.⁸⁰ In this sense, his utopian descriptions contrasted with one of the first and most important examples of utopian vision in Italian culture, Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1623).⁸¹ The Calabrian thinker Campanella drew on Thomas More's *Utopia* and produced a short essay describing an ideal city whose inhabitants live in harmony with nature. In

⁷⁸ 'Le valli delle montagne e tutto lo sterminato altipiano in Tripolitania e in Cirenaica, fino al deserto, sono di un rigoglio incomparabile. Ho veduto gelsi grandi come faggi, ulivi più colossali che le querce. L'erba medica può essere tagliata dodici volte all'anno. Gli alberi da frutta prendono uno sviluppo spettacoloso. Il grano e la meliga danno, negli anni medi, tre e quattro volte il raccolto dei migliori terreni d'Europa coltivati razionalmente. L'orzo è il migliore che si conosca ed è accaparrato dall'Inghilterra per la sua birra. Il bestiame prospera, e anche nello spaventoso abbandono Odierno è esportato a centinaia di migliaia di capi per Malta e l'Egitto. La vigna da grappoli di due e tre chili l'uno. I poponi screscono a grandezza incredibile, a venti e trenta chili per frutto. I datteri sono i più dolci e opimi che l'Africa produca.' Ibid, 171.

⁷⁹ Using nature to its full potential is an important justification of colonialism, see Richard H. Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the "Improvement" of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁸⁰ 'Ma erano frequenti e chiarissimi i segni della preesenza e dell'abbondanza dell'acqua'. Bevione, *Come siamo andati a Tripoli*, 55.

⁸¹ An Aristotelian and Thomist scholar, Campanella was a Dominican monk who participated in a failed resurrection against the Spanish rule in Naples in 1598 and was subsequently imprisoned for 27 years. In prison, he wrote his essay *The City of the Sun* as a utopian vision of a communistic society, a philosophical republic in close harmony with nature. See Germana Ernst, *Tommaso Campanella* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2002).

Campanella's text, the inhabitants of the city, called "Solarians", live in a communitarian agrarian society where 'agriculture is held in high regard' and 'there is not a foot of land that is unproductive'.⁸² Local food included 'meat, butter, honey, cheese, dates, and various kinds of greens', varying according to medicinal and nutritional needs to guarantee good health.⁸³ In Campanella's ideal city, food was not only sufficient but plentiful, diverse and nutritious, produced in part due to nature's fertility, in part thanks to the Solarians' technological abilities. Thus, the fertility was enhanced by the technological skills of its inhabitants.

Bevione's ideas echo Campanella's vision of a utopian city based on agriculture and technology: indeed he claimed that without technology – which the local populations were apparently incapable of developing and using - Libya could not be considered a full utopia; it was a *potential* utopia, based on naturalistic plenty. The utopian land of Libya thus differed sharply from the dystopian state of its population. Bevione repeated this point by juxtaposing the outcomes of Italian and Arab farmers in Libya. In a garden that belongs to the 'Italian Signor Belli', Bevione saw fields of clover harvested ten or twelve times a year. If in Italy olive trees bear fruit every other year, in Tripoli they can be harvested every year, 'especially if they are not beaten by stick, like the Arabs do.'⁸⁴ By attributing the existence of the desert to lack of local initiative and hard work – stating that the boundaries of this 'generous', opulent oasis were marked not by the desert's 'natural necessities, but by man's work'⁸⁵ – Bevione constructed a dichotomy between the natural utopian and the human dystopia in Libya. Yet the tension was not irreversible: with sufficient work and capital, he concluded, all of Tripolitania would be an

⁸² Tommaso Campanella, *La città del sole: dialogo poetico. The City of the Sun: A poetical dialogue*. Trans. by Daniel John Donno (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1981), 83.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 89.

⁸⁴ 'L'ulivo, che da noi da raccolto ogni due anni, può fruttare ogni anno, se è un po' curato, potato, concimato; e soprattutto se non è bastonato, come gli Arabi lo bastonano per farne calare le ulive'. Bevione, *Come siamo andati a Tripoli*, 16.

⁸⁵ 'L'oasi attuale ha i suoi confine segnati, non dalle necessità naturali ma dall'opera dell'uomo.' *Ibid*, 18.

‘oasis’. Evidently the local population, with the possible exception of the Jewish community, failed to realise this vision, therefore rendering Italian conquest a necessity.

Any sign of desolation Bevione blamed on the Arab’s incapacity to cultivate the land properly, which, in turn, he explained as an expression of their innate laziness. He did not argue that the local population actively brought the land to ruin, in the manner that Davis attributed to French colonial thinkers at the time, but rather reproduced earlier nineteenth century tropes about local passivity and inertia which limited the fertile land’s potential, even when the territories he saw and described suggested otherwise. At lunch, his two Bedouin companions ate bread ‘because we brought it, but dates would have been just as satisfying. The palm trees, it is known, give dates without requiring human work. The drink that Arabs need is sour milk, which presumes pasture not agriculture.’⁸⁶ The problem was not only lack of initiative or skill, but also moral deficiency. Bevione shared Corradini’s opposition of a utopian landscape and dystopian inhabitants: a tension that the Italian conquest would help overcome.

Bevione, who spent long months in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania on the eve of the Italian invasion, affirmed that to understand Libya, ‘one would need to come to a land like this one, that, left alone, without human labour, cannot produce; one would need to see these prolific, inert Arabs hanging on to life by strong bonds like a desert plant, capable of living [...] with all evils, in order to understand the establishment of the conditions for the most systematic, indestructible and startling human misery.’⁸⁷ Importantly, he made similar arguments to Corradini’s, suggesting that Libya was ‘left alone’, disconnected and isolated, and by consequence, unable to

⁸⁶ ‘...mangiano con noi il pane perché l’abbiamo portato, ma l’equivalente di datteri li appagherebbe ugualmente. La palma, si sa, da i datteri senza il soccorso del lavoro dell’uomo. La bevanda necessaria all’Arabo e’ il latte agro, che presuppone la pastorizia e non l’agricoltura’. Ibid, 40.

⁸⁷ ‘Bisogna venire sopra una terra come questa, che è lasciata a se sola, e, senza opera d’uomini, non può produrre, bisogna vedere questi Arabi prolifici, inerti e aggrappati alla vita per legamenti tenaci come lo sparto dei loro deserti, capaci di vivere con una radice e con tutti i mali, per comprendere come si possono stabilire fatalmente le condizioni della più sistematica, indistruggibile e sbigottente infelicità umana.’ Ibid, 5.

cultivate its fertile land properly. The argument about connecting Libya to the world was, therefore, part of the conceptualization of Italy's role as an imperial power.

Bevione's writings built on the tensions between utopian imaginaries of the landscape and dystopian imaginaries of its inhabitants to invoke two Italian colonial tropes: a racialized idea of civilizational hierarchy and *romanità*, or the legacy of the Roman Empire.⁸⁸ He merged these two images together to motivate Italy's colonization of the Ottoman provinces and their transformation from a *potential* food utopia to an effective one. Thus, instead of discussing in detail the technical skills that the Italian farmers could bring to North Africa, he relied on notions of historical heritage to justify why Italians would develop the land better than its extant inhabitants. He described 'wild olives born of the roots of the good olive trees planted by the ancient Romans,'⁸⁹ and recalled an 'old legend that seemed to me beautiful yet unserious, but now could be believed', which claimed that in the Roman times, Cyrenaica provided enough olive oil to satisfy the needs not only of Rome, but of the whole of Italy.⁹⁰ Roman heritage was, moreover, alive in the physical body of the Italian farmers who would become agents of political change if sent by the state to revive Tripoli. Bevione envisaged the extension of the Italian political space into North Africa through the arms of 'Apulian or Sicilian farmers', who, he argued, could cultivate the wild olive trees and vast green grass and thus pay a proper tribute to the 'Third Rome'.⁹¹

⁸⁸ For fascist iterations of *Romanità* see M. Stone, "A Flexible Rome: Fascism and the Cult of Romanità", in *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789–1945*, ed. C. Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁸⁹ 'Gli olivi selvatici nati sulle radici degli ulivi buoni piantati *dalli antichi romani*'. Bevione, *Come siamo andati a Tripoli*, 56.

⁹⁰ 'La leggenda mi era parsa bella, ma non seria. Invece ora si poteva crederla'. Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 54-56. For a similar argument on the extension of the polity through the arms of landless farmers – *braccianti* – see Welch, *Vital Subjects*.

Thus, by suggesting that Italian farmers should replace the local ones once the territory is conquered, Bevione indirectly suggested not only to take advantage of the land's fertility but also to restrict, control and eventually replace the native populations.⁹² As Wolfe suggests, colonial plans for land appropriation and settlement reflected “a logic of elimination”, acts of war, and eventually also the exclusion or violent annihilation of local populations.⁹³ In this sense, the realization of food utopias through settler colonialism would entail a new awareness of the importance of ruling the territory directly. This meant not only operating a local system of government, but also settling in Italian labourers that would potentially replace the territory's previous inhabitants, deemed incapable of proper labour and development of the land.⁹⁴ This form of thinking is manifest already in Bevione and Corradini's ideas on colonial agricultural development before the fascist era, as military violence was already considered an acceptable means for the realization of the desired food utopia of plenty.

The outbreak of the Italo-Turkish War, on 29 September 1911, encouraged Arnaldo Fraccaroli (1882-1956) to visit Cyrenaica as a foreign correspondent.⁹⁵ He was a popular author of travel literature and comic theatrical pieces, who doubled as a society journalist for the Milan-based daily newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*. The articles that he wrote, later republished as a book, recount his first-hand experiences in Benghazi and Derna during the war.⁹⁶

⁹² Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event. Writing Past Colonialism* (London: Cassell, 1998); Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁹³ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native”, *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, 4, (2006): 387-409.

⁹⁴ Lorenzo Veracini, “Italian Colonialism through a Settler Colonial Studies Lens.” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 19, 3 (2018); Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁹⁵ On Fraccaroli's biography see the sympathetic account by Gianpietro Olivetto, *La dolce vita di Fraka: storia di Arnaldo Fraccaroli, cronista del Corriere della sera* (Italy, All Around: 2019).

⁹⁶ Arnaldo Fraccaroli, *In Cirenaica con i soldati* (Milan: Treves, 1913); Finaldi, “Dreaming in the desert”.

Despite the ongoing battles, many of which became traumas of defeat in Italian national memory, Fraccaroli still reproduced the earlier images of Libya as a food utopia. His arguments show continuities with earlier views of food plenty as colonial justifications, and share the implicit ambivalence of earlier accounts about the dystopian state of civilization in Libya and the lack of technological, agricultural and culinary skills of its inhabitants. The difficulties of the war, in sum, did not transform his view of Libya's potential as an Italian colony.

Fraccaroli visited Derna, which impressed him as a 'marvellous' garden city, full of naturally abundant orchards and extraordinarily large fruit. At the same time, like Bevione and Corradini, he attributed such plenty to the natural conditions alone and not to the local populations' skills. He was excited to see vegetable gardens cultivated by soldiers near military camps, which proved, for him, that even the most arid land of the camps could produce good results, but only if cultivated by skilled (Italian) farmers.⁹⁷ For Fraccaroli, Italian farmers – in their role as conquering soldiers – were already taking up their part in redeeming the utopian land of plenty that they came to capture. Again, the implied contradiction between the utopian visions of the local agriculture and the dystopian vision of the inhabitants characterises Fraccaroli's message to his Italian readers.

One of the most interesting texts written by Fraccaroli, which embodies the ambiguities that marked his colonial vision, is a short article published in June 1912 in the *Corriere*, focused on cooking, rather than agriculture.⁹⁸ Titled 'Mangeria bona', or 'good food' in the supposedly broken Italian of the local population, the article opens with a critical description of the various dishes that the author had tasted in Cyrenaica: poor man's meals of bread and green onions and more opulent dishes of barley porridge with 'semen' (clarified butter) which did not appeal to his

⁹⁷ Fraccaroli, *In Cirenaica con i soldati*, 103ff.

⁹⁸ Arnaldo Fraccaroli, 'Mangeria bona', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 15 June 1912, 3.

palate. He judged the famous ‘kus-kus’ as the best and most characteristic of local dishes, but mentioned favourably also dried meat fried in butter (‘gaddia’), shorba soup, roast mutton, and polenta with butter. While he expressed pleasure of eating some of the dishes, he concluded that, given this culinary repertoire, it was only natural that the locals preferred Italian cuisine, renouncing on their stews, and ‘begging’ to share some of the pasta, meat and broth of the Italian soldiers in their military ‘mensa’.

Fraccaroli’s discussion of Libyan food is marred by contradictions. While cooked food might be considered a mark of civilization, Fraccaroli did not concede as much to the local population: despite their culinary sophistication he judged their agricultural skills as limited and thus inferred that they lacked civilization.⁹⁹ Even if the local population cultivated a variety of agricultural produce, he argued that they did not know how to cook it properly, in ways that would appeal to a civilized palate. He insisted that the local residents would prefer Italian cuisine – and by extension Italian rule – even though he described local dishes as varied, rich and sometimes tasty. Thus, as Thomson suggested, direct knowledge of Libyan societies did not lead to a better understanding or acceptance, as racial, civilizational and religious prejudices continued to influence the ways in which Italians saw the local populations.

Fraccaroli’s wartime reportage reflects the colonial narrative of Italian journalists, suggesting that Libya embodied a *potential* utopia of agricultural plenty, a land of natural fertility undermined by the dystopian vision of local inaptness that highlighted hierarchical perceptions of civilization and race. While Fraccaroli did not directly discuss racial categories, his reflections on Libyan cuisine convey a range of prejudices that conditioned his views of the local population and the land it inhabited. Similarly to Bevione and Corradini, he did not

⁹⁹ On the notion of civilization and cooked food see the classic study, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (London: Pimlico, 1994)

acknowledge the achievements of the local population, and depicted them in a negative light to justify conquest and domination.

2. Food utopias and hierarchies of race

In their reportages from Libya, the three journalists advanced a vision of settler colonialism suggesting that Italian farmers and peasants would move to newly-established Italian colonies in North Africa.¹⁰⁰ While the details of this settler-colonial project remained largely vague, the three authors reflected on the distinctions between the Italian settlers and the local population, often using implicit and explicit assumptions about civilizational and racial hierarchies. Historians of modern Italy have examined the role of race as a foundational category in the construction of national identity.¹⁰¹ As Lucia Re has argued, ‘racism, colonialism and imperialism are not an incidental, minor (and thus, understandably, largely forgotten) component of Italian identity and Italian history, but that in the final years of ‘Liberal Italy’ (1870-1914) [...] they came increasingly to be defining traits of the Italian national identity.’¹⁰² Similarly, Rhiannon Noel Welch argues that race was an integral part of the formation of the Italian identity after unification and underpinned the discursive constitution of Italians as modern political subjects.¹⁰³ Therefore, as Silvana Patriarca and Valeria Deplano have suggested, race and racism

¹⁰⁰ On Italian settler colonialism in Libya see Veracini, “Italian Colonialism through a Settler Colonial Studies Lens”.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Salvatore Rigione, *Sulle tracce di una mitografia italiana della razza nella rincorsa coloniale* (Florence: ETS, 2020); Silvana Patriarca, “Relazioni pericolose: “razza” e nazione nel Risorgimento” In *La costruzione dello stato-nazione in Italia*, ed. A. Roccucci (Rome: Viella 2012), 109–119; Aliza S. Wong, *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861-1911: Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Michele Nani, *Ai confini della nazione. Stampa e razzismo nell’Italia di fine Ottocento* (Rome: Carocci, 2006); Alberto Burgio (ed). *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d’Italia, 1870-1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999).

¹⁰² Re, “Italians and the invention of race”, 8.

¹⁰³ Welch, *Vital Subjects*, 5.

were not introduced to Italian public discourse by fascism, but have been ‘circulating for quite some time in Italy.’¹⁰⁴

In early twentieth century Italy, as in other European societies of the time, there was no precise and consensual definition of the category of race.¹⁰⁵ Race did not imply a rigid set of prejudices, but a mutable category that often appeared in discussions on good government, corruption, and political skills.¹⁰⁶ Colonial experience contributed to shaping Italian claims about race as a political category, after categories such as ‘Aryan’ and ‘Mediterranean’ were used to justify the colonisation of East Africa in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰⁷ Yet at the same time, racial categories were open-ended, combining cultural and biological factors, and seen as an opportunity to employ modern, scientific methods in the creation of an improved nation through empire.

Claims about race played a central yet ambiguous role in Italian colonial food utopias. Bevione, Corradini and Fraccaroli founded their utopian visions on the racial opposition between Italians and the local population. At times, they also divided into different racial groups, such as ‘Arabs’ (Arabi), ‘Turks’ (Turchi), ‘Blacks’ (Negri) and ‘Jews’ (Ebrei) each endowed with different qualities and with different prospective roles in the future Italian colony. The relations between the ‘races’ and their role in the new vision of settler colonialism remained often unspecified, allowing these thinkers to adapt their imperial visions to changing political realities.

¹⁰⁴ Silvana Patriarca and Valeria Deplano. “Nation, ‘race’, and Racisms in Twentieth-century Italy.” *Modern Italy*, 23, 4 (2018): 349-53.

¹⁰⁵ Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race*, 28.

¹⁰⁶ Giuseppe Finaldi and Daniela Baratieri, ““Without Flinching”: Facing up to Race in Liberal Italy.” *The Australian Journal of Politics and History* 65, 1 (2019): 1-16.

¹⁰⁷ Fabrizio De Donno “La Razza Ario-Mediterranea”, *Interventions*, 8:3 (2006): 394-412.

In April 1911, Bevione wrote an article about the ‘four races’ that populate Tripolitania: ‘Arabi, Negri, Ebrei e Turchi.’¹⁰⁸ He argued that the races or ‘*stirpe*’ are divided geographically– they inhabit different areas – but also physically and culturally. The Arabs, he wrote, are ‘splendid human examples [...] seemingly created to resist long fatigues, to embark upon great distances, and to live of hunting and freedom.’¹⁰⁹ He argued that the proof of their inaptitude was their simple nutrition (their ‘art of nutrition by a handful of flour and dates’) undermining the advanced agricultural knowledge implied by the availability of flour.¹¹⁰ Here again, he did not consider the production of flour as an expression of technological and civilizational skill. The ‘Arab is not a worker. He is intelligent and accepts effortlessly the tools of civilization [...] but he is insensible to the internal and external pressure that impose, with a higher lifestyle, a higher and more intense form of productivity’.¹¹¹ The Arabs had no respect for property and life: Bevione argued that they would have sold their lands to the European had there not been religious-legal bans against it. Thus, Bevione explained the fact that Italian entrepreneurs failed to buy land in Libya through religious prejudices and generalizations that represented the local population as fearful, submissive and conservative. Nonetheless, for him, the Arabs feared not only God, but also the Europeans: they could ‘feel the terrible superiority’ of the Europeans, whom they feared but not hated. Thus, he argued, the Arabs would prefer European occupation to ‘bad Turkish regime’.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Bevione, *Come siamo andati a Tripoli*, 21ff.

¹⁰⁹ ‘fisicamente, gli arabi sono splendidi campioni umani [...] sembrano creati per resistere alle lunghe fatiche, per varcare le grandi distanze, e per vivere di preda e di libertà.’ Ibid, 21.

¹¹⁰ ‘Hanno acquistato per lunga eredità l’arte di nutrirsi con un pugno di farina e di datteri..’ Ibid, 22.

¹¹¹ ‘L’arabo non è un lavoratore’. E’ intelligente, accetta senza sforzo gli strumenti della civiltà [...] ma è insensibile alle pressioni interne ed esterne, che impongono, con un più elevato tenore di vita, una forma più alta e più intense di produzione’. Ibid.

¹¹² ‘Ne sentono la terribile superiorità’; ‘pessimo regime turco’, ibid. 25.

Bevione used the term ‘negri’ to describe the Black population, which for him included ‘much less intelligent but more vigorous workers’ than the Arabs.¹¹³ He praised their respect for life and property, but assigned to them a role of servitude both in the existing Libyan society and in the future colonial one. He did not consider them as politically active, and was not interested in their consent to the Italian occupation. He then turned to the ‘Israelites’, or the Jewish population, a rich minority of bankers and merchants, but not farmers. Although he had previously described a visit to the fertile gardens of a wealthy local family of Jewish merchants, he claimed that Jews were unskilled in agriculture. Replicating antisemitic tropes, he praised the ‘patience, humility, resignation, tenacity, flexibility’ that made them successful money-lenders at exorbitant rates.¹¹⁴ After their humiliation by Arabs and Turks, he assured his Italian readers that the Jewish residents of Libya would welcome European occupation.¹¹⁵

The last ‘race’ in Bevione’s article were the Turks, who, he argued, perceived their own presence in Tripolitania as ‘guests’ while the Italians behaved like the ‘hosts’.¹¹⁶ The Turks’ disinterest in the provinces thus disqualified them from government; only the Italians, not the Ottomans, had the moral obligation to modernize the region and thus should become its rulers. In Bevione’s hierarchy of local races, all but the Turks welcomed Italian rule. Bevione ignored the internal diversity within Italy: while describing Libya as racially diverse, he referred to the Italians as one race, heirs of the ancient legacy of the Romans.¹¹⁷ His imperial project sought to extend Italian influence overseas by establishing new colonies and exploiting agricultural abundance, but at the same time the empire would also contribute to shaping Italian national

¹¹³ ‘I negri sono molto meno intelligenti degli Arabi ma più vigorosi lavoratori’. Ibid, 26.

¹¹⁴ ‘Pazienza, umiltà, rassegnazione, tenacia, flessibilità’, ibid.

¹¹⁵ This claim is supported by later historians of the Jewish community of Libya, see De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo*, 62.

¹¹⁶ ‘Noi sembriamo i padroni, e loro gli ospiti’, Bevione, *Come siamo andati a Tripoli*, 29.

¹¹⁷ See for example Stone, “A Flexible Rome”.

identity at home as a unified and coherent ‘race’ or ‘nation,’ a modern civilization capable of transforming the international order.

Racial conceptions explained the need for a transition from the existing supposedly naturalistic state of affairs in Libya to a new and modern imperial order. All three authors envisaged a shift from the natural food utopia pre-existing in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, to a political order that would use modern agriculture to bring to full fruition the natural benefits of the land. This transformation aimed to produce food; economic and commercial gains were desirable but secondary. In this sense, there is a distinct difference from earlier French and British visions of food plenty, which interpreted the benefits of colonization in terms of trade. For the journalists here considered, the key to the change was race: the Italian conquest was justified by a scalar conception of racial differences. Race was not (only) a biological category, but an assemblage of biological, cultural, moral and behavioural features, with an emphasis on attitudes towards labour and productivity. Race was a radical political category, in the sense that it could be used to justify – and perhaps encourage – a significant transformation of the international order through colonization.

The three writers blamed the unskilled residents of being unable to use the presumed land of plenty, due to innate limitations that could not be overcome by education alone.¹¹⁸ Differences of race – and by consequence of civilization – were constantly drawn and emphasized. While some of the local population could learn modern agricultural techniques, for others the development of advanced technologies was against their ‘nature’ and thus impossible. Italian soldiers, by contrast, manifested their agricultural knowledge upon arrival. Similarly to the effortless supply of food that characterized the mythical land of Cuccagna, Fraccaroli argued

¹¹⁸ Compare with declensionist narratives in French Algeria in Davis, *Resurrecting the Granary of Rome*.

that, with modern skills and knowledge, little effort would suffice to obtain thriving gardens even when the local conditions were less than perfect. Placing colonizers and colonized on a racial-civilizational scale, these thinkers celebrated Italy's supposed racial and civilizational superiority providing examples that showed even a meagre success, such as a vegetable garden cultivated by soldiers, and intentionally ignoring any evidence for the local populations' agricultural skills and know-how. The implied message was that without the Italian colonizers, Libya would remain a contradictory space of utopia and dystopia, a land of plenty and hunger outside the sphere of human civilization.

Conclusion

This article has explored some of the ways in which food imaginary constructed visions of colonial international order. By discussing Italian colonial ideas, the article sought to understand how food, and especially agricultural produce, was invoked in journalistic texts to reinforce a rhetoric of colonial conquest. Food-centred political utopias – from Campanella, through the myth of Cuccagna to the thinkers explored here – can be seen as a recurring mode in Italian political thought. By examining a relatively neglected chapter in this long-term history – the colonial visions of Liberal Italy – the article seeks to widen our knowledge of modern European intellectual history. Thinking about food and colonialism thus emerges as a meaningful form of political thought, that unites political, racial, environmental and cultural concerns to generate new visions of international order.

It is important to note that colonial visions of food plenty did not depend on factual accuracy. Indeed, often their hyperbolic descriptions echoed the mythical images of Cuccagna which were distinctly unrealistic. During the Italian colonial campaign in Libya, utopian representations of

North Africa in the press have been denounced as false fantasies by contemporaneous thinkers such as Gaetano Salvemini, historian and later member of Italian parliament. Salvemini famously challenged the racist assumptions behind the utopian visions and their exaggerated claims about the agrarian skills of Italian farmers.¹¹⁹ Yet even such criticism did not undermine the colonial project as a whole: Salvemini did not target the *legitimacy* of Italian colonialism, but Italy's *capacity* to realise it successfully.¹²⁰ Nonetheless, claims about the falsity of Libyan food utopia had a relatively small impact on the public debate on colonialism. Historians have shown that the pro-colonial press campaign, in which visions of food utopia played a central role, had a decisive effect on the government's eventual decision to launch a war of conquest and colonise Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.¹²¹

The Italian case is further illuminating in revealing the ambivalences weaved into colonial visions of food plenty.¹²² The protagonists of this article developed a colonial rhetoric based on a supposed dichotomy between utopian food plenty and dystopian native population, which contained an inherent ambivalence about the land's fertility and the skills of the future colonists and colonized. The descriptions of the landscape and the agricultural production in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica undermined the sharp opposition between the supposedly 'civilized' Italians and the 'uncivilized' local populations. Thus, their ideas about civilization, skill and

¹¹⁹ Gaetano Salvemini, "La coltura Italiana e Tripoli", republished in *"Come siamo andati in Libia" e altri scritti dal 1900 al 1915* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963), 102ff.

¹²⁰ Others, such as the radical geographer Arcangelo Ghisleri, who published detailed surveys and cartographies of African geography, criticized the Eurocentric and racist overtones of Italian debates on Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and denounced Italy's imperial campaigns as illegitimate. Arcangelo Ghisleri, *Atlante d'Africa* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1909); Arcangelo Ghisleri, *Tripolitania e Cirenaica dal Mediterraneo al Sahara* (Milan-Bergamo: Società Editoriale Italiana, Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1912); Federico Ferretti, "Arcangelo Ghisleri and the 'Right to Barbarity': Geography and Anti-colonialism in Italy in the Age of Empire (1875–1914)," *Antipode*, 48 (2016): 563–583.

¹²¹ Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Libia*, Vol 1. chap. 2.

¹²² On the ambivalence of the Italian observations see also Laura Ricci, *La lingua dell'impero. Comunicazione, letteratura e propaganda nell'età del colonialismo italiano* (Rome: Carocci, 2005), 83-85.

agricultural fertility appeared vague and confusing. In this context of conceptual unclarity, arguments about hierarchies of race and the legacies of the Roman Empire were used to justify colonization and to motivate conquest.

In the colonial project envisaged here – often depicted in broad brush strokes rather than in minute detail – national identity mattered. By the early twentieth century, Italian imperialists were promoting their colonial projects against the backdrop of rising nationalist ideologies. The Italian case exemplifies how colonial rhetoric tasked the nation-state rather than private initiative with the establishment of settler colonies, and, by consequence, with forging national identity from above. Yet this project was not wholly successful. While the realization of food plenty utopias could forge a new national identity, Proglia has shown that the difficulties of colonialism only served to increase fears of national inferiority.¹²³ If, as Re has claimed, the Libyan war represents a turning point in the process of ‘making Italians’, then the ambivalent imagery of colonial utopia projected uncertainty on Italy’s national identity as well as on perceptions of its international role.¹²⁴ Such attempts, however, became more powerful and decisive under the fascist regime, as Libya – and other Italian colonies in Africa – gained a significant role in forging the idea of the nation and the agrarian and food policies that it entailed.¹²⁵

While Liberal Italian colonial food utopias were marked by particular features – such as lack of factual foundation, ambivalence and national identity – they also represent, I argue, a mode of political thought that can be explored in other contexts as well. This intellectual investigation sought to generate conceptual frameworks to understand the historical interplay of

¹²³ Proglia, *Libia 1911-1912*.

¹²⁴ Re, “Italians and the Invention of Race”, 6.

¹²⁵ On the relations between nationalism, nature and fascism see for example Marco Armiero, Roberta Biasillo, Wilko Graf Von Hardenberg, *La natura del duce. Una storia ambientale del fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2022). Michele Sollai, “How to Feed an Empire? Agrarian Science, Indigenous Farming, and Wheat Autarky in Italian-Occupied Ethiopia, 1937-1941.” *Agricultural History* 96, 3 (2022): 379–416.

ideas about international political order and food more generally, and thus to open new research paths for future scholarship in the history of ideas.