ITALY’S COLONIAL PAST

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In August 2012, a number of news outlets—including the New York Times and the BBC—reported on the inauguration in a village near Rome of a mausoleum and memorial park to Fascist Field Marshal Rodolfo Graziani. The honoree certainly had plenty of “achievements” to his name. In the early 1930s he fought the resistance in Italy’s Libyan colonies by imprisoning 100,000 civilians in concentration camps in the Sirte desert. About 40 percent of the internees perished (Rochat, 1981). In the war against Ethiopia in 1935–6, Graziani employed poison gas and later brutally repressed any form of opposition, ordering for instance the massacre of the estimated 2,000 inhabitants of the Debre Libanos convent (Campbell, 2010: 318). Until his death in 1955, he never expressed the slightest remorse.

Despite this lamentable record, considerable public funds were made available for his memorialization. Local authorities (as well as wider circles of politicians on the right) were happy to foster the memory of a war criminal, brushing off criticism with the contention that he had fought for the glory of the fatherland. Their attitude revealed the degree to which the Fascist past, including the regime’s crimes, has now been condoned in Italy (Mammone, 2006). Critical responses to the memorial—from blogs to demonstrations to the monument’s defilement—aimed for their part to restore that anti-Fascist consensus on which the Republic of Italy had been founded. Both sides, however, couched their reactions in similar terms, in the sense that they were exclusively about Fascism. There was little attempt to grapple with the history of Italian colonialism and the African experience under Italian rule.

That colonial history had begun soon after Italian unification and lasted well over sixty years. In the second half of the nineteenth century, conscious that other European powers had already occupied the world’s most valuable regions, a number of Italian businessmen and politicians clamored for colonies. A less powerful faction opposed expansion, believing that Italy’s millions of emigrants represented its most precious resource overseas (Choate, 2008). Still the “scramble for Africa” was on, and many felt that for Italy to be seen as a European player, it needed a share in the action.

In the early 1880s, the Kingdom of Italy set up outposts in the Red Sea ports of Assab and Massawa. The occupation of the hinterland in the following years brought the establishment of the colony of Eritrea. In 1888, Italy claimed Somalia. However, the desire to expand further and colonize Ethiopia fared less well and ended in military defeat in 1896. The famed loss at Adwa compounded the disappointment of 1881, when France had forcibly imposed a
protectorate over Tunisia, long considered by Italy to be its de facto possession. Humiliation over these missed opportunities lingered until the invasion of Libya in 1911. The success of the campaign in 1912 added the two colonies of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica as well as the Dodecanese Islands, extending Italy’s presence in the Mediterranean.

After World War I, with the Fascists in power, Italy continued the push for expansion, though with visions of a different kind of empire. While in the liberal period colonial holdings were pursued mainly for commercial exploitation and political status, the Fascists envisioned a demographic colonialism that would provide land to a toiling Italian settler population. After the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, this vision came to define expectations and policies and found early expression in a state-sponsored settlement program in Libya. Yet the Fascist expansionist zeal, in an uneasy alliance with a rapidly expanding Nazi Germany, eventually led to total defeat in World War II and the loss of all colonies.

A number of characteristics are immediately apparent from this short survey. The first is that, in comparison with other European powers, the Italian colonial project began late, ended early, and was geographically limited. Second, the most significant episodes of Italy’s colonial rule took place under Fascism and ended with Fascism, and it is thus not surprising that the Fascist past and its legacy have often stolen the spotlight from the colonial experience as such. Third, Italy was forcibly deprived of its colonies in the aftermath of World War II, and therefore never experienced a concerted phase of decolonization. It thus did not face the concurrent intellectual and moral imperatives to adjust its self-perception and relationship to the world. The result is that, even though Italy does indeed have a significant colonial past, public awareness has been fragmentary at best, and often overshadowed by debates about Fascism. Historiography too, as we will see, for a long time neglected Italy’s ventures overseas. But alongside the public sphere and historical scholarship, there is a third realm where “knowledge” of the colonial past is retained—namely in the form of personal memories of those who lived through it. After brief discussions of the public and then scholarly arenas, this contribution will turn to those personal memories, arguing that historians can make much greater use of them than they have, and in that way extend to the wider public a realistic but intelligible account of how ordinary Italians became caught up in colonial violence and domination.

Scholars have criticized the public’s neglect of the colonial past as a form of “colonial amnesia” (Triulzi, 2006). Even so, every few years the colonial past returns to claim the front pages. June 2009 saw Colonel Mu’ammer al-Gaddafi’s first visit to Italy. He arrived at Rome’s airport dressed in full military regalia and bearing on his chest a 1931 photograph of Libyan resistance fighter Omar Mukhtar. The photo showed Mukhtar in chains after his capture by the Italians and shortly before his execution. (This was in advance of a Rome meeting that was meant to strengthen relations between Italy and Libya.) In this context, the resurgence of past colonial crimes in the news served as a foil against which to deride the antics of a colorful dictator and highlight not Italy’s past crimes but its current amends in the form of financial aid and commercial investment in Libya. Yet Italy was not just making amends; it was gaining access to lucrative oil and natural gas reserves. And it was paying its former colony to detain and deport African migrants seeking passage to Italy, effectively outsourcing the repression of unwanted immigration (De Cesari, 2012).

Four years previously, in April 2005, another “eruption” of Italy’s colonial history had taken place, this time relating to the return of the Axum stele—war booty from Italy’s Ethiopian campaign in the late 1930s—from Rome’s Piazza di Porta Capena to Ethiopia. Even though
its restitution was promised in a 1947 peace agreement, the stele had remained in Rome for nearly 60 years because of delays and obstructions on Italy’s part (Acquarelli, 2010). Press coverage in 2005 presented a benevolent Italy conscientiously effecting the restoration despite the great difficulty of transporting an artistic treasure, despite concerns that an unstable political situation in Ethiopia might endanger the stele, and despite the fact that much of Italy’s “own” art remained dispersed in museums and collections around the world.

If colonial echoes thus periodically reverberate in the public arena, they do so in very particular ways that obscure and distort the history of Italy’s colonial rule (Baratieri, 2009). For one thing, the echoes are intense but short-lived. As many scholars have pointed out, because of Italy’s abrupt and enforced decolonization, there has never been a sustained societal engagement and thus no means by which to address the colonial past at more than surface level (Labanca, 2004). A second important but often overlooked point, however, is the one already made above, namely that colonial issues have been for the most part subsumed under the Fascist experience. As we have seen in the case of Field Marshal Graziani, the specific questions of colonial rule are often lost behind point-scoring in relation to post-Fascist politicking. Moreover, because the colonies could be treated as an excrescence of Fascist rule rather than as part and parcel of Italian history and thus a continuing responsibility of the new Republic, there has been little sense of a colonial legacy even where we might expect it. For instance, the 2008 agreement between Libya and Italy included a highly publicized provision to police migration across the Mediterranean. This provision might well have reminded us of Italian colonialism’s demographic program, which in 1938 and 1939 involved the migration of thousands of Italians to Libya, with the intention of eventually settling half a million Italians on the Libyan shore and two million in East Africa. And yet in the response to immigrants in Italy today there is little to no memory of the Fascist promise of an Africa Italiana hosting millions of Italians.

Finally, it is not least because of Fascism’s claim to be a far lesser evil to Nazism (Ben-Ghiat, 2004) that Italy has come to understand itself as a benign power, a claim that has often been extended to the realm of its colonial politics. The postwar United Nations War Crimes Commission reports had provided early authentication of Italy’s colonial atrocities (the use of concentration camps and gas in warfare) and a number of serious scholarly publications appearing in the 1970s made it impossible to deny these crimes, but the notion that the Italians had been brava gente, “good people,” in the colonies, and in every other context, has prevailed (Bidussa, 1994; Del Boca, 2005; Focardi, 2013). According to this view, Italy had only acted like every other European power in Africa, indeed more benignly and self-effacingly so, and today it is in any case offering gestures of reconciliation, eager to assist and educate its former colonies.

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If we turn from public discourse to scholarship, it is not hard to find historical works that seek to overturn the public’s benign complacency. In the postwar years, work on the colonies by Italian historians tended to take one of two forms. On the one hand, there were the inevitable apologetic and celebratory accounts, most prominent among them a monumental study of Italy’s colonial “achievements” commissioned by the Foreign Ministry in the 1950s to show what excellent colonizers the Italians had been and how they had been slighted by postwar peace agreements depriving them of their colonial possessions (Morone, 2010). On the other hand, there were the lonely exponents of conscientious scrutiny and attendant condemnation, most notably Angelo Del Boca, whose work can still be read with profit today. An early critic of the notion of the brava gente, Del Boca decried the actions of the regime and its functionaries. Yet in generally depicting Italian settlers, workers, and even soldiers as either duped or plainly
exploited by the regime, he in fact unwittingly reinforced the very notion he was seeking to critique, reinforcing the contrast between bad regime and good people.

The political upheavals of the early 1990s in Italy and in Europe as a whole offered room to rethink Italy’s historical legacy, including its participation in European imperialism. When scholarship on the colonies experienced a revival in the 1990s, it was no doubt also prompted by (though initially not necessarily in conversation with) the rise of postcolonial studies. Moreover, shocked by the xenophobic reaction to immigration, many scholars felt impelled to delve into the precedents of Italian racism. But once again it was new currents in the scholarship on Fascism that colored depictions of the colonial past. In 1992 the “First Republic” collapsed and with it the already weakened anti-Fascist consensus (as outlined by Philip Cooke in Chapter 27 in this volume). With Mussolini’s Italy now openly painted in more rosy colors in some quarters, many historians felt called upon to prove just how repressive and brutal the Fascists had been. And the colonies offered a natural arena to do so.

However much it has been subordinated to debates about Fascism, there is no doubt that this recent slate of work has given us a clearer sense of the political and institutional dimensions of Italy’s colonial past, of gender and race relations in the colonies and the homeland, and the cross fertilization between Italian culture and the nation’s colonial endeavors. Some recent studies have also interwoven Italy’s colonial and postcolonial history with an eye toward immigration today (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, 2012; Mellino, 2006). Contemporary fiction by authors from the former colonies is raising awareness of colonialism in ways that can engage audiences more deeply than straight historical work ever can (Polezzi, 2007; Jedlowski, 2012). As a result we now have a much fuller account of what Italian colonialism was like—brutal, exploitative, involving various interest groups, garnering a modicum of enthusiasm from below, and thus in its basic contours not unlike other colonialisms (Labanca, 2002).

Many exponents of this recent wave of colonial historiography have been outraged by the lack of public awareness of the crimes Italy committed in Africa and the lack of postcolonial sentiment still today. Yet there is nothing particularly Italian about these silences and evasions. All active empires share the conviction of being “good empires,” morally superior to all others, and it is the legacy of all fallen empires that their descendants seem unable to relinquish this illusion fully—though the particular national myths and silences vary. It is true that the Germans, who underwent a similar colonial trajectory to Italy’s, seem to outdo everyone in condemning their colonial past through government action, scholarship, and public debate, as evidenced by the 2004 apology for the Herero genocide perpetrated by Germany in Namibia, but then the Germans have had plenty of practice in “coming to terms” with their past. Britain too succeeded in decolonizing its public discourse to an incomparably greater degree than Italy, but it also easily accommodates positive assessments of its empire by reputable scholars. In the case of Italy, the fact that colonial rule was also Fascist rule has set definite limits to the degree to which scholarship today can celebrate the country’s “benign” mission in Africa. There are simply no equivalents of a Niall Fergusson in Italy today. And while the topic of colonialism does not receive appropriate attention in the Italian history school curriculum, Italy’s government has not (yet) legislated the teaching of a positive imperial past, as happened in France in 2005.10

Thus in Italy as elsewhere, scholars, armed with a sense of the historian’s moral responsibility as custodian of national memory, have often condemned what they see as a self-serving and politicized whitewash of the past. And in Italy as elsewhere, despite historians’ claims to objectivity and scientific standards, they have often failed to convince the public. Indeed, they find themselves accused of blind spots of their own, and of only telling a negative story that has nothing to
offer the nation. It seems that rendering the colonial past plausible and accessible involves more than just persuading people that atrocities occurred. It means making intelligible how it was that ordinary Italians saw meaning in the colonial project and how they came to engage in brutal exploitation, even murderous violence. Above all, it means focusing on how participants made sense of their quotidian involvement in a colonial enterprise that seems so entirely illegitimate and problematic today.

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So far I have largely avoided using the term “memory,” even though, in contemporary scholarship on the past’s representation in the present, the vocabulary of memory and associated terms such as amnesia, repression, trauma, and so forth are the norm.11 The reason for avoiding the term is that “memory” functions at best as a rather imprecise and overworked metaphor for the processes of public communication through which the past is described, re-enacted, and refracted by people who often have no direct recollection of the events in question. It is questionable whether the social knowledge of the past can be adequately conveyed as “memory,” particularly when that knowledge is made up of a thousand different perceptions and judgments, which seem to go far beyond the act of recall. In the colonial context, I thus prefer to reserve the term for the dwindling number of people still alive who in one way or another played a direct part in Italy’s colonial activities. We might add to this number those no longer alive who wrote their memoirs or whose experiences have been recorded in oral history collections. Of course, such private memories do not constitute some kind of “pure” storage of the past, untainted by subsequent public discourse. As is now generally understood, we tend to recall the past not as we originally experienced it, but as we last told it (Bridge and Paller, 2012). Our telling and retelling is influenced by the wider cultural context, and with each new instance of recall, a new contextual layer is laid down in memory. Public narratives and mood thus seep into personal memory. Yet I will argue that the personal narratives of former colonialists—as well as those of their former subjects—are not just sediment formed from the swirling currents of public discourse. While they are often complex and hard to read—the entanglement of Fascism and colonialism in settler narratives, for example, is even more intractable than in public and scholarly discourse—they nevertheless contain crucial experiences and evaluations that may help us think through the specificities of Italy’s colonial past. As an example of what can be recovered from such memories, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the experience and postwar narratives of former Italian settlers in the colonies.

One of the central themes that emerges from oral history interviews conducted in 2004 with Italians who had resided in Libya12 and from published recollections of Italians in East Africa is the colonists’ memory of their own hard work, with associated narratives about economic ambitions, lack of alternatives, and, most importantly, broken dreams. Accounts from workers, soldiers, and settlers in Libya and East Africa speak of deprivation and hardship, not only during war and rebellion, but also afterwards, when Italians purportedly controlled the territory and began to settle and exploit its resources. The recollection of hardship is directly tied to the perception that, as my interviewee Samuele Turrini relayed to me, in the colonies, “there was nothing.” In such recollections, the Italians turned desert landscapes into blooming gardens and modern cities thanks to their ingenuity, stamina, patience, and more than anything, plain hard work (Labanca, 2001; Taddia, 1988). In almost all memories, the colonists’ sweat and toil is presented as a legitimation for having participated in the colonial enterprise and as an investment that warranted—but never delivered—a reward.
Africa represented a great hope also because of the lack of alternatives. For Carlo Lo Cascio the luckiest were those who got land in Sicily—a much better prospect than going to the colonies. Afrà Rinaldi remembered the family’s new Libyan farmstead as “all sand,” but, nonetheless, an improvement on their life on the Italian peninsula. Earlier, scores of Italians had availed themselves of the opportunity to emigrate; now with new restrictions in place both in receiving countries and within Italy itself, emigration was no longer possible. Settlers spoke of Africa as their “American” opportunity, perceiving their relocation as part of a long-standing family and community history of migration rather than as beholden to the regime’s expansionist aspirations. Many Italians who went to Africa—not only temporary workers but also those expected to settle permanently—were hoping to make a “fortune” in order to return to their homes in Italy and live a better life there. While implicitly acknowledging their readiness to exploit the colonies, they were explicitly emphasizing the temporary character of their presence there, an emphasis admittedly designed to diminish their “guilt” as colonizers, but one that also spoke of their world and what had made sense to them.

Historian Nicola Labanca, too, finds in such oral histories not straightforward “nostalgia” but a lot of talk of sacrifice and suffering (Labanca et al., 2000). To be sure, many who were forcibly removed in the postwar period from what had become their homes bemoaned what they had lost. But what strikes one again and again is that Italy’s former colonists tend to regret rather what they had never gained. Colonial riches were for many an unfulfilled “promise”—measured against their sense of what colonialism should have delivered.

Many former colonists talk about going to Africa with great hopes, nourished by regime propaganda but also by a broader sense of the golden opportunities that imperialism bestows. Luigi Montelli went to Africa on his brother’s assurance that he would become the estate “manager.” His imagination was fed by a common perception of what it meant to be a “colonizer,” and he fancied himself the facsimile of a British overseer commanding a large estate in Africa. For Montelli, the British colonizer was a model to be emulated, but according to the regime it was an exemplar to be shunned. Enrico Nadini told of one family that came to Libya with the “wrong ideas.” Husband and wife had fallen on hard times in Italy and dreamt of an African comeback. Soon enough they were sent back to Italy because they were not interested in hard work but “wanted to command like the English in Kenya.” Nadini here echoed what the settlement agencies’ archival documents testify repeatedly: that Fascist colonialism conceived itself as different, independent of native labor, built on the sweat and muscle of Italian families; and that from the regime’s standpoint, many Italians proved themselves unfit because of unrealistic expectations. Then, as now, highlighting the peculiarities of Italian colonialism was meant to justify the enterprise. Then, as now, other colonialisms served as a foil against which to fantasize about one’s own achievements and legitimacy.

Alongside hard work and broken dreams, a second abiding theme in settler memories relates to the tension between the presence of an authoritarian government and the sense of liberty that the colonies indulged. Many went to the colonies with high expectations and enthusiasm for the “African adventure” and the possibilities for self-realization it afforded (Taddia, 1988). This was partly because of a shared sense that imperialism entitles, gives freedoms, bestows mastery. At the same time, Italians, even those in Africa, were living under a dictatorship. Turrini noted that there was “maximum liberty” in the colony “in spite of Fascism.” Francesco Amilon said there was “more elasticity” in the colony, “more,” that is, in comparison with Italy. Interviewees time and again felt the need to comment on the regime’s authoritarianism, even if only to dismiss its influence in Africa. And yet, the authoritarian control was real, not only for the native populations, who were subjected to very different treatment, to exploitation and outright violence. Soldiers, laborers, and settlers talk about how their days were structured, how they were directed...
in the most basic tasks, how they sought to circumvent rules and prohibitions time and again, and how, when they were caught, punishments were severe, sometimes even entailing repatriation to Italy.

These remarks provide a bridge to a third cluster of memories, concerning the native populations. Settlers like to talk of shared human hardship and claim that in the long run amicable and equitable relations were necessary and even desirable. For instance, settlers who moved to Libya in the late 1930s recall their good intentions in treating the Arab population on an “equal” basis. Apparently, these good intentions were even state-sanctioned. Carlo Lo Cascio remembered that during the passage to Libya settlers were taught the concept of “sua-sua”: Arabs and Italians were “sua-sua,” the same, in their own ways. Such recollections are certainly shaped by the desire to purge the image of Italians as evil colonizers and salvage the legacy of their former presence in Libya. Yet, while I would not dispute the possibility of friendship between individual Italians and Arabs in Libya, such talk of “equality” cannot disguise the systemic inequality and oppression.

The reality of oppression stood in contrast to the particular vision of the settlement program. Of course, there were also large estates with native labor, but for the settlement of thousands of Italians, the idea was one of a self-contained and segregated Italian society. Fascist settlement agents specifically forbade the creation of a traditional white colonial ruling class. Italian farmers under contract in Libya were not allowed to hire indigenous labor, even if paid out of their own pockets. Settlers were not supposed to take on the persona of a dominating, lordly colonialist. Instead, they were called upon to master and appropriate the land with their own sweat. Agricultural settlement, hard labor, and ownership of the soil were regarded as indispensable for permanently and unmistakably establishing Italian claims to sovereignty. Yet this vision never truly came to fruition.

While several interviewees seemed to recall a society where “for us they didn’t exist,” the colonies depended heavily on native labor. Rinaldi told of how Arabs had prepared the land and thus upon her family’s arrival in Libya in November 1938 they did not have to work until the sowing season a few months later. Lo Cascio remembered the 40 native workers his family employed, without mentioning, and conceivably without knowing, that the state contract forbade the hiring of native labor. Turrini spoke of his father’s involvement in road construction, where each crew consisted of one Italian engineer, one Italian assistant, one Italian builder, and 400–500 Arab workers. And yet these stories did not seem to unsettle the triumphant narrative of Italian labor transforming the colony.

Montelli, the most critical of my conversation partners regarding the settlement plan, asserted that “it had not been right to take the land from the Libyans,” but added that “we worked the land,” implying that the Libyans had not. Such comments are, of course, informed by perceptions of the “proper” use of natural resources. It is the talk of the modernization and valorization drive enacted by colonizers the world over. But when he referred to the appropriation of the land, Montelli said “they took the best land,” meaning, presumably, “they” the Fascists or the colonial higher-ups. Also Lo Cascio, in mentioning disputes with the Arabs over the land, said that “they”, the Fascists, “muscled in on Arab territory.” Here, the dictatorship, or the presence of an authoritarian colonial government, provided some absolution to the negative reality of one’s own involvement in colonial matters.

When Italians do talk about conquest, war, and the violence perpetrated against Africans, they do so in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way. Soldiers talk of hard-fought battles, the massacres of enemy soldiers, the use of gas (Taddia, 1988), openly admitting the war crimes denied by the Italian government into the 1990s. The war stories are told as if there had been no good guys or bad guys, only combatants—never mind that only their side had defied the
Geneva Conventions. Field Marshal Graziani, for instance, was remembered by several of my interviewees as ruling with an “iron fist.” Rather than denying or hiding atrocities, they talked about them without my asking, as part of the historical narrative, as they progressed through time in recollecting the Italian presence in Africa. Here as elsewhere, the problem is not so much that former colonists defend their involvement in colonialism, but rather that they do not even see why they would need to. They rarely recognize the lack of legitimacy of the enterprise as a whole, its brutality and arbitrariness. They talk of their own difficulties in life, of illness and death, of tragedies, and even of occasional happiness, but they do not see themselves as perpetrators. Rather, they cast themselves as victims.

It is worth pointing out that although I have here highlighted Italian memories, African recollections represent an indispensable element in the reconstruction of Italy’s colonial past and the recognition of its legacy today. Yet even the remembrances of Africans do not provide an easy route into accuracy. Several scholars have for instance shown how the memory of the colonized can sometimes reinforce the image of the *italiani brava gente* (Doumanis, 1997). This is the case in Eritrea, where the conflict with Ethiopia has given rise to a representation of the Eritrean askari in the Italian army, and by extension the Italians, as modernizers and nation-builders (Palma, 2007; Triulzi, 2006; Iyob, 2005).

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On one level, then, the colonists simply reproduce the same kinds of memory moves that we know from public discourse, with Fascism serving as overlay and alibi. My interviewees rarely reflected on colonialism per se because their memories related not just to a colonial but also to a Fascist past. This entanglement of Fascism and colonialism in private memory has had paradoxical effects. On the one hand, the fact that in Italian public discourse there is room for a positive assessment of Fascism has helped to create space for positive private memories of the Fascist enterprise in Africa (Pergher, 2012). Indeed, the colonial sphere has become a particular showcase for Fascism’s modernizing and civilizing potential. On the other hand, the fact that the settlers themselves were domineered and often chose to work against official rules served in their minds to distance them from the regime and thus absolve them of the state’s harshest actions against the colonized. Fascism here functions as the convenient culprit in addressing colonial injustices. In other words, the colonists seem to enjoy a double helping of defense mechanism by having their cake and eating it too: “Because it was us, Fascism could not have been so bad; and because Fascism was in charge, it really was not us.”

Yet if these accounts seem to be offering the same mixture of inconsistent viewpoints, rationalizations, and apologias, on a deeper level they do present a way of transcending the *brava gente* narrative and reaching an understanding of involvement that at least admits the reality of violence. For one thing, we have plainly seen that the everyday was embedded in structures of expropriation and exploitation. For another, many settlers have memories or knowledge of violence. For all the rosy colors, the unvarnished nature of colonial rule is not hard to expose to the light.

Moreover, if we read between the lines to get at the assumptions and experiences that shaped their perceptions and behavior, we can see that they acted in ways that made sense and seemed normal, and at the same time that they were not “innocent” or somehow outside the structures of exploitation. Above all, the colonists were informed by a general sense of colonialism as a system that conferred advantages and entitlements, a system legitimated by an alleged European superiority in cultural, biological, and technological terms. This undergirded their expectations at the time and continued to inform their assessment thereafter. Because the colonists’ frame
of reference was often an implicit understanding of European colonial practice—either as model or lesson—their narratives help to place the Italian colonial past in the much broader story of Italy’s, Europe’s, and Africa’s past.

Even so, the colonists were also underdogs. The experience of poverty at home and of migration as the only way out was another crucial part of their mental universe. They were used to the notion that leaving was the key to self-improvement. Moreover the settlers’ world was one in which powerful entities—the regime, but also the family, the neighbors, and the military unit—shoved you around. Uncovering this universe of experiences and expectations helps us better locate Italian colonialism in the past, but it also offers us a sense of the various contexts that frame judgment and perception today.

The argument here then is that, listened to attentively, personal memories so often dismissed as rose-tinted or even whitewashed can indeed enable us to enrich the “public memory” of Italy’s colonial past and thus succeed where critical scholarship has often failed. For one, the complexity presented in these individual accounts forces us to discard the simplistic duality of “good people” and their opposite. These accounts show recognizably human individuals operating within a particular system where being “good”—which required stepping outside the moral imperatives of that system—was an exception, not the norm. No one who conformed to this system was doing “good,” but neither did the failure to challenge a system engineered to meet open defiance with harsh repercussions make people uniformly “evil.” Moreover, the same individuals might find themselves performing very different roles at different times. There is no reason to believe that the family man entertaining cordial relations with the native population was not the same one who participated in the massacres of Addis Ababa, when following the attack on Viceroy Graziani in 1937 not only the military but also civilians were given free rein to subdue the city’s population.

On an even broader level, the personal memories are also useful in comprehending and locating contemporary responses to postcolonial questions. Through their narratives we discover that colonists’ expectations and justification had drawn on a whole repertoire of experiences and preconceptions—relating to European imperialism, fascination with Africa and the Orient, the legacy of overseas migration, also to experiences of poverty and marginalization, and to popular ideas of how to get by and how to make a fortune, and more. This rich archive of norms and common sense is revealing not least because parts of it continue to shape attitudes today. But even where the colonists’ own mental horizons are not our own, uncovering them helps us to recognize the meta-level at which such judgments are formed. In public debates, this kind of broader context is seldom addressed explicitly. Colonial issues, when they emerge, are discussed in narrow terms, and rarely do we explore the quiet connections that are made when the colonial past actually “erupts” in the news. I refer to that repertoire of understandings, prejudices, attitudes, and assumptions that is constructed through schooling, the cursory reading of papers, the leisurely enjoyment of a novel or a film, and discussions with friends and acquaintances, and that in some way or another is shaped by and reflects on the colonial past. Judgments about the colonial past, we realize, are embedded in an extensive body of opinions concerning Africa more broadly, immigration in Italy today, Italy’s role in the world, what it is to be “modern,” “civilized,” and “developed,” and so on. Harder to define and dissect, this postcolonial imagination (albeit rarely informed by the sensibility of postcolonial scholarship) undoubtedly acts as a broader and deeper repository of opinions about what Italy’s colonial past might mean and how it might matter. The more aware we can be of this broader context, the more we can truly locate and explicate the significance of Italy’s colonial experience for the present. And the more we as scholars can make the public aware of the assumptions and experiences that lie below the surface, the more we can encourage a taking of responsibility in the present for that colonial past.
Notes


2 In April 2013, under the new regional governor Nicola Zingaretti, public funds were cut and the municipality accused of misappropriating funds allocated for the creation of a park and a monument to the unknown soldier. See “Svolta ad Affile, Zingaretti annuncia: ‘Stop ai fondi per il mausoleo di Graziani,’” La Repubblica, 22 April 2013. Available online at http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/04/22/news/affile_zingaretti_stop_ai_fondi_per_il_mausoleo_di_graziani-57227641/ (accessed 15 January 2015).

3 For a discussion of the continuing presence of Fascism and anti-Fascism in public discourse in Italy today, see Chapter 27 by Philip Cooke in this volume.


7 The agreement was signed in Benghazi on 30 August 2008.

8 Much more present in public discussions of immigration and racism in Italy today is Italians’ own experience of mass emigration during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. A key publication aimed at a broad readership was Gian Antonio Stella, L’orda. Quando gli albanesi eravamo noi (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003).

9 Drawing a direct link between popular racism in the 1990s and colonial racism was anthropologist Paola Tabet’s study of racial prejudice among Italian schoolchildren in La pelle giusta (Turin: Einaudi, 1997). Also La Menzogna della Razza. Documenti e immagini del razzismo e dell’antisemittismo fascista (Bologna: Grafis, 1994) edited by the Centro Furio Jesi and published in conjunction with an exhibition took contemporary racism in Italy as an incentive to revisit the past.

10 Art. 4 of Law n. 2005–158 from 23 February 2005 required that schoolteachers highlight the “positive role of the French presence overseas.” Following the intervention of President Jacques Chirac in early 2006 the law was modified and Art. 4 repealed.

11 For a discussion of public memory in cinema and filmic representation of the past, see Chapter 25 by Paolo Jedlowski in this volume, which also addresses the near absence of the colonial past in Italian film.

12 In 2004 I conducted 12 separate interviews with 14 former settlers in Libya who now reside in Italy. I have changed the names of my interviewees to protect their privacy.

Bibliography


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