

Colonialism and National Identity

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

PAOLO BERTELLA FARNETTI
AND CECILIA DAU NOVELLI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

some showing empathy.

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

HISTORIANS, SOURCES AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

ERASURE AND DENIAL OF THE PAST: THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD OF ITALIAN COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

CECILIA DAU NOVELLI

1. The original sin

The eighties and nineties saw colonial historiography pass through a period of progressive oblivion which lasted until its revival at the beginning of this century. This serious and relentless erasure of colonial guilt and even parts of history itself is something that has long weighed on our collective conscience.¹

The first historical survey to be carried out in the seventies was based on the memoirs of people like Indro Montanelli, Roberto Battaglia, and Ennio Flaiano who had all been protagonists in the African conflicts. Then there were the frequent clashes of opinion between Renzo De Felice and Angelo Del Boca, with the anything but insignificant contributions from authoritative Anglo-Saxon historians like Denis Mack Smith and John Whittam, and of course Giorgio Rochat's celebrated forays into military history. The eighties and nineties were the period of erasure of the past, a time when writing about colonialism was more or less equated with actually being a member of the dreaded imperialist band. In the beginning, anything "colonial" referred to the political news of Italian expansion in Africa. During the fascist period, "History and Colonial Policy" championed the achievements of the regime, with people like Bernardo Valentino Vecchi, who held the chair in Colonial Culture at the Fascist Colonial Institute at the Royal University of Milan,² or Cesare Giardini

¹Angelo Del Boca, *L'Africa nella coscienza degli italiani. Miti, memorie, errori, sconfitte* [Africa in the Italian conscience. Myths, memories, mistakes, failures] (1992; reprint, Milan: Mondadori, 2002), v–vi.

² Bernardo Valentino Vecchi, *Sei mesi sul fronte Nord-Etiopico. La conquista del Tigray* [Six months on the North-Ethiopian front. The conquest of Tigray] (Milan: Bietti, 1936). Author of numerous other successful works, such as: *Somalia*

from the Institute of International Political Studies, founded in 1936, once again in Milan.³

Many journalists followed the troops to Africa to write their glowing reports of every victory. Several young reporters were even enrolled in the army and fought in the first fascist war. These included Battaglia, Flaiano, and Montanelli who were almost all born between 1909 and 1913. Flaiano and Battaglia served as officials, while Montanelli was a volunteer. His war, as commanding officer of a company of Askaris, only lasted two months, but he did have time to write the *XX Battaglione Eritreo* in true war reporter style. The book was published in 1936 and had great success, selling more than thirty thousand copies. Montanelli then remained in Ethiopia for another year at the Press and Propaganda Office and as editor of the *Nuova Eritrea*.⁴ The journalist and the likes of Bruno and Vittorio Mussolini treated the war as if it were a kind of a day out in the countryside. The Mussolini brothers had no difficulty in becoming leading protagonists in the whole affair and could often be seen “happily” piloting their own planes as the undisputed masters of the skies.⁵ All three have nothing but good to say about the war. Montanelli talks of it being “a nice long holiday”; while for Mussolini it was simply “fun”.

On the contrary, the ex-officer Flaiano’s 1947 novel lays bare all the atrocities committed in the dehumanising process of war. He even reveals what he calls the “most basic secret of imperialism”, that is to say, paying the Askaris to do the dirty work, since after all “Africa is a cubbyhole filled with all kinds of junk where you go just to stretch your legs.”⁶ Battaglia also served there, and, shortly after, in 1958, wrote a book that combined the history of Italian reconstruction with his Abyssinian memoirs. As an old-school partisan, Battaglia considered the defence of Abyssinia as a war of resistance against the Italian invaders.⁷

(*vicende e problemi*) [Somalia, events and problems] (Milan: Marangoni, 1935); *L’Italia ai margini d’Etiopia* [Italy on the edge of Ethiopia] (Milan: Bietti, 1935).

³ Cesare Giardini, *Italiani in A.O. Pagine di Pionieri* [Italians in East Africa. Pioneering moments] (Milan: Industrie Grafiche Amedeo Nicola, 1936).

⁴ Recently republished after seventy years of silence. Indro Montanelli, *XX Battaglione Eritreo* [20th Eritrean Battalion] ed. Angelo Del Boca (Milan: Rizzoli, 2010).

⁵ He also wrote a book of Vittorio Mussolini’s memoirs, *Voli sulle Ambe* [Flights over the Ambas] (Florence: Sansoni, 1937), 48–50.

⁶ Ennio Flaiano, *Tempo di uccidere* [A Time to Kill] (Milan: Rizzoli, 2013), 94; published in 1947 and winning the first Premio Strega [Strega Prize] in the same year.

⁷ Roberto Battaglia, *La prima guerra d’Africa* [The First African War] (Turin: Einaudi, 1958).

The very first time that historiography truthfully dealt with colonialism was in the seventies and eighties as part of the works on fascism. The pioneer was Angelo Del Boca, who returned to the scene of the crime, thirty years after the invasion, and demolished the still popular rhetorical construction of the fascist image surrounding these issues. The fact that Del Boca had been part of the resistance probably made him more sensitive to the suffering of the oppressed. His first *La guerra d'Abissinia* (1965) is practically a news report based on documents and witnesses' statements and already has all the essential themes of his monumental work. For example, the significant similarity between the regime's expansionist plans and the "mainspring of evasion and adventure" that inspired so many Italians. This was our frontier, "our Far-West" with its abundant resources above and below the ground. A far cry from that "sandbox" of Libya, where so much had been spilt in blood, sweat, and tears with so little to show for it. And then there is the "Adowa complex", the cause of many a nightmare. This was how so many Italians came to be bewitched by the mirage of Africa, although, perhaps not quite so many, if we are to believe the data showing the actual number of volunteers. Moreover, conquering Ethiopia was not such an easy task and nothing went as expected. In fact, a far larger expeditionary force and nerve gas had to be deployed to thwart the Ethiopian counteroffensive. And although Ethiopia was indeed conquered, total occupation was never achieved, and the regime never managed to put its long aspired policy of "demographic colonization" into practice.⁸

In the seventies and eighties, Del Boca wrote four other books on the Italians in East Africa and two on the Italians in Libya. What makes these works so original is the social slant he uses to tackle what was happening in Africa. These are not books about military or political-diplomatic history, but rather, as Del Boca himself affirms, they give us the "history of Italian behaviour in Africa."⁹ In fact, some of the most enthralling pages

⁸ Angelo Del Boca, *La guerra d'Abissinia 1935-1941* [The war in Abyssinia 1935-1941] (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965), 9-15, 66-77, 212.

⁹ Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale* [The Italians in East Africa] vol. 1, *Dall'Unità alla marcia su Roma* [From Unification to the March on Rome] (Bari: Laterza, 1976); vol. 2, *La conquista dell'Impero* [The conquest of the Empire] (Bari: Laterza, 1979); vol. 3, *La caduta dell'Impero* [The fall of the Empire] (Bari: Laterza, 1982); vol. 4, *Nostalgia delle colonie* [Colonial nostalgia] (Bari: Laterza, 1984). Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Libia* [The Italians in Libya] vol. 1, *Tripoli bel suol d'Amore* [Tripoli, beautiful land of Love] (Bari: Laterza, 1986); vol. 2, *Dal fascismo a Gheddafi* [From fascism to Gaddafi] (Bari: Laterza, 1986).

are those that offer a description of the kinds of human beings that crowded these newly conquered lands. Little did it matter whether it was Somalia, Eritrea or Ethiopia; Italy needed to have her own gang of cowboys. In the words of Franco Monile, “These are men of the woods, whose half-open shirts reveal tanned and muscular chests, while their shorts show off their knobbly knees and spindly legs. These half ‘Maremma Mountain’-half ‘Prairie’ men walk around in their sturdy boots and gesticulate a lot. They are always ready to argue and like to shout and even to sing quite often. They also have a strong jaw. It’s quite an interesting group.”¹⁰ Back home, almost everybody was quite “satisfied”, even though very few were really aware of just how much the enterprise had cost in terms of human and material losses.

This was also the period when De Felice began writing his long series of works about Mussolini.¹¹ Although his *Mussolini il duce* was not about colonial history in particular, he did devote an entire chapter to “The Ethiopian War”. His approach, however, was nothing like Del Boca’s.

The two historians disagree on a number of issues, such as the actual date of the start of the Ethiopian campaign—1924 for Del Boca, 1934 for De Felice—and the latter also fails to mention the use of chemical gas against the unarmed Abyssinians. Such differences are significant, but the greatest disparity lies in their attitude towards the war in Ethiopia, since De Felice takes an extremely positive and enthusiastic view of the whole endeavour. More than once he defines it as an outstanding *tour de force*, “merit” of Mussolini’s policies. “The war in Ethiopia was Mussolini’s most successful political masterpiece, because he was firmly convinced of its importance, probably even more so than for any of his other political initiatives.” The author even goes as far as to say that this enterprise was

¹⁰ Del Boca, *La conquista dell’Impero*, 89.

¹¹ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario 1883–1920* [Mussolini the revolutionary 1883–1920] (Turin: Einaudi, 1965); *Mussolini il fascista* [Mussolini the fascist] vol. 1, *La conquista del potere 1921–1925* [The conquest of power 1921–1925] (Turin: Einaudi, 1966); vol. 2, *L’organizzazione dello Stato fascista 1925–1929* [The organization of the fascist State 1925–1929] (Turin: Einaudi, 1969); *Mussolini il duce* [Mussolini the Duce] vol. 1, *Gli anni del consenso 1929–1936* [The years of consent 1929–1936] (Turin: Einaudi, 1974); vol. 2, *Lo Stato totalitario 1936–1940* [The totalitarian State 1936–1940] (Turin: Einaudi, 1981); *Mussolini l’alleato* [Mussolini the ally], vol. 1, *L’Italia in guerra 1940–1943*, [Italy at war 1940–1943] bk. 1, *Dalla guerra breve alla guerra lunga* [From a short to a long war] (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), bk. 2, *Crisi e agonia del regime* [Crisis and agony in the regime] (Turin: Einaudi, 1990); *Mussolini l’alleato* [Mussolini the ally] vol. 2, *La guerra civile 1943–1945* [The Civil War 1943–1945] (Turin: Einaudi, 1997).

“far superior to any British one,” allowing *Il Duce* to “dominate” and keep a firm grip on events, ensuring the “success of [his] policy in Ethiopia.” He never questions exactly what this success really was, nor does he make the slightest mention of the lack of territorial control, the subsequent guerrilla war, or even the brutality of the Italian rule, which had quickly poisoned the originally positive feelings of the Ethiopians towards their conquerors. In fact, after just two years of occupation, Ethiopian resistance was starting to spread. Instead, De Felice prefers to talk about the “resounding success” both at home, with “the effective and truly spontaneous phenomenon of collective participation” in the Ethiopian enterprise, and also abroad, with the withdrawal of foreign sanctions.¹² Obviously, apart from the fact that it is going a bit far to suggest that the Italian “consent” to fascism was quite so heartfelt, De Felice’s interpretation does not offer a “detached and impartial criticism”, but seems more concerned with offering a justification for the whole event.¹³

The Abyssinian war also earned sharp criticism from the British historian Mack Smith, who defined it as more of a “catastrophe” than a success. Just as in the Libyan conquest, the Italians showed a remarkable lack of preparation and an inability to govern. They also seemed to have generally underestimated the enemy, mistakenly regarded as an underdeveloped population. Smith’s *Le guerre del Duce* devotes several chapters to the colonies and the Italian way of life in Africa.

The colonization of Libya in the thirties had been a massive enterprise. Roads and villages had been built, land distributed to the settler’s families, and Mussolini’s visit in 1937 was the crowning event. The cost, however, in economic terms far exceeded the benefits. What is more, the reason why Italy never made any serious attempts to drill for petrol in Libya is another mystery that defies explanation: Libya had long been recognised as one of the most hydrocarbon rich countries in the world, while Italy lacked any energy sources of its own and had even set up the AGIP Company (National Hydrocarbon Institute).

The fascists described Ethiopia as the land of “milk and honey”—a land of enormous wealth—that Italy had to hurry up and win, for fear that some other nation would get there first. An impressive expeditionary force was put together and poison gas was used with “chilling results”. Mack Smith acknowledges the fact that all this was a “huge success in the eyes of the public” and suggests that this accounts for De Felice’s use of the term *masterpiece*. The esteemed scholar, however, held a far harsher

¹² De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, 1:642–43, 754, 761.

¹³ Renzo De Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo* [Interview on fascism] (1975; reprint, Bari: Laterza, 1976), 6.

opinion. “What on the face of it might have seemed a great result was actually in danger of becoming a premise for catastrophe.” This was also because it led to Mussolini’s megalomania and his belief that he could “beat anyone.” The rest was the result of a short-sighted policy of repression, the presumption that the enemy was a group of barbarians, and the use of violence and coercive power.

Basically, Italy’s original sin in Africa was the practice of apartheid. From August 1936 onwards, the Italian Ministry for Africa decided that the whites and the locals had to live apart and they were also forbidden any dealings with each other. Everything from residential areas to transport was divided and there were severe punishments for anyone breaking the rules. At a time when France, Portugal, and the Netherlands were well on their way to creating a racially mixed society, and even the British were beginning to recognize the rights of coloured people, Italy was still clinging onto paternalism and racism. Moreover, there was a lack of any kind of critical analysis on the part of the Church and the intellectual elite as regards theories of racial inferiority. In Mack Smith’s opinion, this managed to nullify the memory of any Italian positive achievements in Africa.¹⁴

John Whittam is equally critical when he notes that the Italian army was far from ready to fight, either before the war in Libya or even for the Ethiopian campaign. There was a clear contradiction in a fascist ideology whose foreign policies of grandeur overlooked its patently inadequate level of military preparedness. The reason for this problem lay in the conflict that was brewing between the professional army and the fascist hierarchy. Mussolini himself did much to stoke up this rivalry, convinced that this rift would make it easier for him to rule, but also because he had more faith in his all unqualified hierarchy. Therefore, a *divide et impera* policy was put into practice that avoided any unwelcome, and possibly unruly, public gatherings of power. The army was also ostensibly loyal to the king rather than to *Il Duce*. In Mussolini’s opinion—as Whittam points out—the Ethiopian Campaign should have been a “fascist war” under his direct control without any intermediaries involved. The whole affair was spiced up by an incongruity that actually led *Il Duce* to get rid of two of his *gerarchi*, Balbo and De Bono, only to appoint a soldier in their place. Balbo was sent packing because his growing success in the air was making him more popular than the Leader himself. Next, De Bono was appointed

¹⁴ Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire* (London: Longman, 1976); *Le guerre del Duce* [The Duce’s Wars] (Bari: Laterza, 1979), 143, 98, 102. Two chapters are devoted entirely to colonialism: 1922–32, 43–58; and 1936–39, 143–166.

Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, but his lack of decision meant that he was the next to go only a few months later. Last but not least, Mussolini's choice fell on Marshal Badoglio, who was a great supporter of bombings and poison gas.¹⁵ In Whittam's interpretation, the massive human and economic losses for such a small amount of land made the Ethiopian war anything but a "masterpiece".

In the sixties and seventies, the problem of imperialism stirred the still troubled waters of Italian historiography. In the mid-sixties, Giampiero Carocci started to deal with Italian imperialism, making use of Wolfgang Mommsen's "formal and informal" categories.¹⁶ On the edge of the debate on Italian industrialization, Carocci's analysis deals with the state of affairs in Italy, its weakness and status as a "runner-up" in the panorama of European capitalist countries.¹⁷ The debate also touched on the growing role of the middle class and its role in the dismantling of Giolitti's power bloc, and the crisis of the narrow-minded political elite. This was also the time when new and influential powers, such as the agrarian bourgeoisie and the metallurgical, textile, sugar, and electrical industries, were starting to emerge and protest against the neutralism of the liberal State.¹⁸ Carocci takes up the matter once again in his *L'età dell'imperialismo*, where he affirms that almost all the European phenomena occurring in the period between the nineteenth and twentieth century could serve as examples of imperialism. Born in Florence in 1919, Carocci had been an anti-fascist, served as an officer in the army, and even been deported to a prison camp in Germany. He came from a Gramscian background and was an acute observer of economic and social issues. Well aware of the highly charged controversy regarding the Marxist definition of imperialism, he did not think twice about tackling what he called one of the most important phenomena in contemporary European history. At the same time, however,

¹⁵ John Whittam, *The politics of the Italian Army, 1861–1918* (London: Croom Helm; Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977); *Storia dell'esercito italiano* [A history of the Italian Army] (Milan: Rizzoli, 1979), 356–62.

¹⁶ Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Das Zeitalter des Imperialismus* [The Age of Imperialism] (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1969); *L'età dell'imperialismo. Europa 1885–1918* [The Age of Imperialism. Europe 1885–1918] (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1970).

¹⁷ Giampiero Carocci, "Appunti sull'imperialismo fascista negli anni venti," [Notes on fascist imperialism in the twenties] *Studi storici* (1967): 113–137; and "Contributo alla discussione sull'imperialismo," [Contribution to the debate on imperialism] *Movimento di liberazione in Italia* (Jan–March 1971): 3–14.

¹⁸ Valerio Castronovo, "Il potere economico e il fascismo," [Economic power and fascism] in *Fascismo e società italiana*, ed. Guido Quazza, (Turin: Einaudi, 1973), 45–88.

he also appreciated that its complexity meant that an analysis could not confine itself to mere economic factors—as theorized by Lenin—but also had to consider the political and social aspects.¹⁹ Giuseppe Maione also takes the socio-economic aspects into account in his work on the social classes and high finance in the Ethiopian war, where the determining factor for the conquest of the empire was the redistribution of gold. In Mussolini's opinion, the richest countries were those who had a colonial empire. As a result, to avoid collapse under the effects of the economic crisis, Italy had to take its place on the stage of these events.²⁰

Giuseppe Are also published another work dealing with imperialism in the mid-seventies. He presents the phenomenon as putting an end to the libertarian ideals of the early nineteenth century Risorgimento movement, almost like a sort of toxin that was poisoning the liberal ideas that had once animated Europe. We are witness to a sort of diabolical reversal of values where the early nineteenth century conquest of independence, now becomes oppression and seizure of power. Since Italian industry was mainly involved in the secondary sector, Italy had no choice but to follow the civilising mission of the colonialists, even though, its poverty rates were actually not much better than those of the conquered peoples. Indeed, the country seemed to be divided into two: on the one hand, it was the land of emigrants in search of a rosier future, while, on the other, it was a great nation whose future lay in imperialism.²¹

Furthermore, the debate on imperialism in Italy gave rise to several studies on the role of the political parties in the colonial wars. First of all, we have Maurizio Degl'Innocenti's work on the Socialist Party and the war in Libya. Degl'Innocenti claims that Turati and the other socialist leaders had somewhat underestimated Italy's involvement in the war, combined with an over-optimism and blind faith in the myth of anti-imperialist, democratic unity. The watchwords of the emerging nationalism—Italy's right to divide up Africa; the poor people's right to the “promised

¹⁹ Giampiero Carocci, *L'età dell'imperialismo. Profili di storia contemporanea 1870–1918* [The age of imperialism. Outlines of contemporary history] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1979).

²⁰ Giuseppe Maione, *L'imperialismo straccione. Classi sociali e finanza di guerra dall'impresa etiopica al conflitto mondiale (1935–1943)* [Ragged imperialism. Social classes and war spending from the Ethiopian undertaking to the World War (1935–1943)] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1979).

²¹ Giuseppe Are, *La scoperta dell'imperialismo. Il dibattito nella cultura italiana del primo novecento* [The discovery of imperialism. The early twentieth century Italian cultural debate] (Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 1985), 55. These works, however, had already been published between 1974 and 1975.

land”—seemed almost to be the prerogative of a small number of people. In truth, they were actually the common heritage of a large part of the population and led to the crisis in the socialist party.²² Furthermore, the Risorgimento party, as well as the Republicans and the Liberals, was also sceptical about the rise of nationalism, and the Catholic party proved just as hostile to the idea. However—as Luigi Ganapini tells us—both the “Catholic World” and a large part of the clergy, bishops, and priests did get quite carried away by the atmosphere of patriotic enthusiasm.²³

2. Colonialism and identity

A key factor therefore in understanding the contemporary age must be a reflection on the link between colonialism and national identity, two essential elements in the development of the Nations of today. Colonialism has certainly been a cornerstone for all the great European powers which, historically speaking, were already major powers at the beginning of the nineteenth century: the UK, France, the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, and Portugal. Even more recently formed nations such as Belgium, Italy, and Germany wanted to face the challenges of colonial conquests. However, apart from the very limited period in which Italy actually achieved her goal, it is interesting to see just how far the construction of an Italian identity was influenced by the colonial experience. We are no longer limited to merely talking about “colonial policy”—a far cry from colonialism—which, as Guido Quazza affirms,²⁴ has been the perfect litmus test of the relationship between foreign and domestic policy. Instead, “modern history” is no longer content with just asking questions about politics, but also considers everything that is involved in building a nation and her identity, including collective imagination, attitudes, and behaviours.

In this sense, colonialism was an exogenous element, a kind of external factor whose model Italy copied from the other European nations. In fact, there was really nothing endogenous about it, since it was not rooted in the

²² Maurizio Degl’Innocenti, *Il socialismo italiano e la guerra di Libia* [Italian socialism and the war in Libya] (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1976).

²³ Luigi Ganapini, *Il nazionalismo cattolico. I cattolici e la politica estera in Italia dal 1871 al 1914* [Catholic nationalism. Catholics and foreign policy in Italy from 1871 to 1914] (Bari: Laterza, 1970).

²⁴ Guido Quazza, “Continuità e rottura nella politica coloniale da Mancini a Mussolini,” [Continuity and rupture in colonial policy from Mancini to Mussolini] in *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo* [Fascism’s colonial wars] ed. Angelo Del Boca (Bari: Laterza, 1991), 6.

history of the Italian nation, with its common Latin heritage, its Catholic tradition, its hundred towns, and an economy based on craftwork and cottage industries.

Nonetheless, colonialism also managed to become a sort of pseudo-endogenous factor and play a significant role in collective memory and imagination and in the construction of the self and relationships with the other. This role was especially important in a country like ours, where unification had happened relatively recently, and collective identity was particularly weak. In this sense an emblematic case is that of the districts in numerous Italian towns named after colonial areas only after the land had been lost. For example, in Rome's *Africano* quartier we find Viale Eritrea, Viale Etiopia, Viale Libia, Viale Somalia, and a gem like Piazza Gondar, although this dates from the sixties and seventies. This story of memory and erasure of the past had to wait until the second millennium to be retold by modern historiography. This was the period when the cloak of silence, along with the amnesia and mythicization that stemmed from the need to pardon the “good” Italians, was finally thrown off for good.

As noted before, Angelo Del Boca was the first to shed extensive light on the violence, the use of chemical weapons, the death camps, the action squads, and the segregation imposed by the Italian colonies, and nothing more needs to be said. However, although the effect of colonialism on foreign affairs is clear to see, its connection with the construction of a new national identity within Italy itself still needs to be clarified.

This is due to several reasons which are, first of all, strictly chronological and to do with the late Unification of the country. This had been anything but a smooth process and had made Italy more of a centrifugal than a strongly centralized state. Then, of course, the country lacked a colonial tradition, which was something invented by the liberal governments to give Italy international visibility and a position on the European stage. And again, one cannot overlook the fact that Italy itself had been a colony for many years and, on more than one occasion, had witnessed the passage of foreign troops through its lands. Despite the long gap between the Roman Empire and fascism, the memory of the former was to have a decisive influence on the colonial conquests.

The purchase of the Bay of Assab in 1882 and the more virtual than authentic conquest of Libya in 1911 were an attempt to try and build a colonial empire and had a dramatic effect on the construction of the Italian identity. In fact, this perspective of a colonial future went a long way to solving the irreconcilable differences between Catholics and secularists, and the rift between North and South, which constantly threatened the already shaky notions of internal identity. This was why, especially in the

period around the turn of the twentieth century, the news was filled with countless reports about events to do with the colonies. Whatever the success of these facts, they certainly played their part in directing attention away from what was happening back home.

Literature also played a considerable role. However, unlike most of the works produced by the authors from Europe's major imperial powers, Italian writers almost seem to have undertones of anti-colonialism. One such case was Emilio Salgari, who penned a number of successful books between 1883 and the early twentieth century. His stories about the Pirates of Malaysia, Caribbean corsairs, and buccaneers from Bermuda are set in the Far East, where Italy's Colonialism had never arrived. The invented characters of his tales are always shown as overcoming the powers that be, to such an extent that they might almost be considered heroes of the struggle against colonialism. The legendary noble-born Sandokan, son of a King of Borneo ousted by the British, fought all his life against the corrupt and violent British governor. At his side, his trusted friend Yanez who was a symbol of the Portuguese colonialism that had now come to an end. Even an Italian nobleman, the Black Corsair, had gone to fight against the Dutch governor of the Antilles to avenge the wrongs done to the poor Indians.²⁵ We are therefore witness to a multi-faceted national identity made up of great ambitions for power, feelings of being a Johnny-come-lately, the misery of being a country of emigrants, and a tendency to side with the rebels.

On the contrary, popular songs had plenty to do with national identity. With the conquest of Libya the colonial and patriotic song that sang the praises of the “fourth shore” was on everybody's lips. In 1911, apart from the famous song to *Tripoli*, there are plenty of other lesser known examples, such as *A Marina e Tripoli, L'Italia a Tripoli, Pasquale va a Tripoli, Grandi manovre* and *Viva l'Italia*, which all promptly took up the theme of colonial conquest.²⁶

In actual fact, the issue of colonialism probably only started to become part of the Italian identity when the fascist colonial empire was pompously established in 1936, also thanks to a full-blown, albeit forced, consensus. The matter was not just a question of mobilization and colonial conquest, but was also a useful way of diverting attention from the poverty and destitution that were rife in Italy itself. This kind of transfer allowed the

²⁵ Claudio Gallo and Giuseppe Bonomi, *Emilio Salgari. La macchina dei sogni* [Emilio Salgari. The dream machine] (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2011), 162.

²⁶ Gianni Borgna, *Storia della canzone italiana* [History of Italian song] (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), 45.

regime to divert the Italians' attention elsewhere and far away from all the problems of the dictatorship itself. All the construction work that the Italians undertook in East Africa seems more a way of turning the tables on the shortcomings of the Liberal government than the dream of the Italian population. It also has much of a somewhat forced attempt to keep up with the other great European powers. Obviously, the situation of chronic poverty and landlessness drove many Italians to set off for East Africa in search of a better future, but they did so with the same pioneering spirit that—a few decades earlier—had guided their parents to America to make their fortune. This is the period when triumphalism rings out in the many patriotic songs, ranging from the famous *Faccetta nera* of 1936—which had to be rewritten since the first version dwelt a little too much on the graces of the Ethiopian women—to the even more resounding tones of *Africanina, Sul Lago Tana, Ti saluto (vado in Abissinia), Ritorna il Legionario*.

The propaganda that accompanied the birth of an authentic colonial literature was managed directly by the Ministry of the Colonies. 1926 saw the first edition of the monthly publication *Esotica. Mensile di letteratura coloniale*, which two years later became *L'Oltremare*, the organ of the Fascist Colonial Institute. While a spontaneous popular colonial literature struggled to be born, a pattern of fascist literature was established and reproduced through widespread distribution.²⁷ The landmark was Arnaldo Cipolla's 1922 novel *Un'imperatrice d'Etiopia*, which even won a referendum on colonial literature in 1931. This prolific journalist was the *Corriere della Sera* African correspondent and, in actual fact, he soon rid himself of the set schema of fascist propaganda. In the twenties he was dubbed the Italian Kipling but—unlike the English master—he was aware of the limitations and shortcomings of the much-vaunted white civilization. In 1937, he writes that Belgium "had literally raided and devastated the Congo in just a few years." He even goes as far as to make a comparison between the cannibalism of the primitive peoples armed with their arrows and spears and the rifle-armed cannibalism of the Belgian forces.²⁸ This colonial literature therefore has quite a few cracks and manages to deviate from the norm that even the regime's strict censorship policy could not control. Cipolla did allow himself a rhetorical

²⁷ Massimo Boddi, *Letteratura dell'Impero e romanzi coloniali (1922–1935)* [Imperial literature and colonial novels (1922–1935)] (Minturno: Caramanica, 2012).

²⁸ Arnaldo Cipolla, *Continente nero* [The dark Continent] (Rome: Vettorini, 1937), 170.

“Ethiopia you are my homeland”, but he always maintains a respectful and light-hearted tone.

However, no one could ever be allowed to forget the different status of the colony settlers—Italian citizens—compared to the natives who were simple subjects. This strict distinction had been part of the law for the overseas territories ever since the time of the first colonial conquests. The idea of subordinate indigenous peoples who should be denied any rights found the liberal governments and the fascists in complete agreement. However, the fascist period also strengthened the connection with the construction of national identity, albeit an imposed one. Entire families were deported to Libya and then to Ethiopia in order to cultivate the land, whatever the harsh conditions. They were lured there by the prospect of a better future, but forced to make a hasty escape when these colonised states gained their independence.

The years of the Republic were years of erasure of the past. The former colonies were forgotten for decades, never to be mentioned, almost like an original sin. After the Liberation there was an attempt by De Gasperi to view the matter in another rather more mindful way. Even though the colonies had been conquered during the dictatorship, he suggested that they could represent a work resource for the Italian people and even an opportunity for the democratic growth of Italy and the occupied countries.

De Gasperi's proposal however did not bear fruit, and Italy was forced to give up its colonial empire whatever her claims to sovereignty over the pre-fascist possessions of Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia. At the same time, several areas were also lost along the eastern border. The American authorities had proved to be a disappointment, as their only interest was putting an end to the parenthesis of dictatorship and war. Moreover, De Gasperi was convinced that the signing of the February 1947 Peace Treaty was the painful price Italy had to pay in order to regain its place as a democratic country.²⁹ Libya, Albania, Ethiopia, and Eritrea all gained their independence, while Italy maintained a trusteeship over Somalia until 1960.

A new intervention strategy was adopted in the last part of the fifties. This coincided with the growing difficulties of both France and Great Britain and involved an attempt to make limited inroads into the Mediterranean and North Africa. Such action stemmed from the realization that Italian industry could increasingly find a natural outlet in these countries with which it was still on good terms. The economic miracle

²⁹ Alessandro Varsori, “Le scelte internazionali,” [International choices] in *Storia d'Italia* [History of Italy] vol. 5. *La Repubblica* [The Republic] (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1997), 270–72.

represented a turning point in the understanding of how colonialism could gradually evolve into economic cooperation.

Generally speaking, Republican policy can therefore be divided into two distinct phases. The first occurred in the period immediately after the end of the Second World War when the victorious allied nations forced Italy to abruptly relinquish all her former colonial possessions. Then, in the late fifties and early sixties, with the boom in Italian industrialization and the arrival of a centre-left government, a new surge of interest was directed to these selfsame countries and others in the Mediterranean.

For all its aggressive and violent nature, this colonialism of ours has always been a bit of a fake, first imposed by power-thirsty liberal governments and then by the fascist mania for nationalist grandeur, only to disappear in a puff of smoke in the face of the dramatic defeats in the war. Our colonialism is made up of songs and farces, but also of all the crimes and massacres, which were celebrated and immortalized in the rivers of ink and the drawings and photos that filled the pages of the *Illustrazione Italiana* and the steady streams of newsreels. To a certain extent it had little to do with the reality of the Italian social situation, although this did not make it any less heartfelt or real. However, it has never really been completely integrated into the creation of an Italian national identity.

Historiography has kept a close eye on political developments. In the beginning, we have a distinction between “colonial history” and national history, where the former was manifested by the oppression of the inferior underlings. Next, the history of Africa and colonialism are linked, since an “other” was discovered that should be respected but also exploited. The foundation of the Republic was witness to an erasure of the past, when former colonies were forgotten about and left to their own devices. A glimmer of interest reappeared in the sixties and seventies dictated by the need to come to terms with this uncomfortable past. Then, once again, the whole issue fades into oblivion at the end of the twentieth century when there was a violent refusal of the colonial past. And finally, the completely new kind of interest shown by the young historians of today, which derives from many, different factors and is influenced by our multi-ethnic society. Modern day studies are not simply the result of combining anthropological, sociological, and economic methodology, but are actually a real cultural revolution. To a certain extent, the realization that colonialism is as much a part of Italian identity as the Risorgimento, Rome or even the Italian National anthem is a bitter pill to swallow.

3. A different outlook

The end of the twentieth century has opened the curtains on a new phase, and—as we all know—the century really came to an end in 1989. Admittedly, this new historical phase was mainly in the hands of the new generations, but it still has its origins in an erasure of the past and was even set rolling by an “old” historian. This is less of a contradiction than it appears, since it only goes to prove the dogged stubbornness of Italian society in denying that colonialism had ever happened. In spring 1989, in the very year that witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall, the symbol of a divided Europe, Angelo Del Boca himself was involved in organizing a conference that was never to be held. The conference organizers, the Piacenza IRSAP, had already received funding from the Emilia Romagna Region and several other institutions. The conference schedule was ready in summer 1989 and the speakers had all been invited, when dissenting voices started to be heard on the horizon. There were protests about the inappropriateness of the conference theme and about the presence of Italian, Libyan, and Ethiopian historians all in the same place. All of a sudden, the backers withdrew their support and the conference was never held. However, thanks to the sheer tenacity of the organizer, the various papers were indeed published two years later. This certainly marked the beginning of a new phase: the works of Libyan and Ethiopian historians appeared in the same volume; the Ethiopian resistance was given space to make itself heard and, for the first time ever, unpublished documents and unexplored archives were put to use.³⁰

It did not take long for everything to change. Both the taboos and the parties that had imposed them were brushed under the table. 1968 had created the perfect opportunity to understand diversity, but politically it had blocked any kind of integration. Through its overwhelming of ideologies, the fall of the Berlin of the Wall had also allowed politics to open up to new frontiers. However, this was probably not such a simple process, given that Giorgio Rochat—not such a youngster himself—was able to write in 2005 that “the memory of the Italian wars is ‘split’ into a host of different memories” and basically still reeling from the difficulty of coming to terms with the regime. In his book on the Italian wars, the synthesis of forty years of work and research, he also gives an account of his own development that mirrors history itself: from the history of institutions and military leaders, to that of the soldiers and the officers that had gone to war. Starting with the reconquest of Libya right up to the war

³⁰ Del Boca, *Le guerre coloniali del fascismo*, v –vii.

in Ethiopia, Rochat gives an account of Mussolini's gradual involvement in a battle that began as a colonial campaign and turned into a full-blown war. The enterprise saw the greatest deployment of military power the world had ever seen. What is more, he also notes the remarkable commitment of the volunteer militia, where so many fascists eagerly signed up to fight. However, the construction of the Empire was anything but a smooth and trouble free process. It lacked a plan, men, and even maps. Moreover, and rather amazingly, the troops even seemed to have lost the ability to fight that they had shown in the conquest of Libya. It almost seemed as if the regime and its forces had used up all their energy in the conquest of the empire, and the test of World War II had now found them wanting.³¹

The real turning point came in the early 1990s with all the works by Nicola Labanca, who published his *Storia dell'Italia coloniale* in 1994.³² A number of historiographical reflections also appeared at the beginning of the new millennium. Italy had started to take her place on both the international scene and in the *Scramble for Africa* and was in the act of being transformed from an "informal empire" to a "formal" one. This came about at a moment of history when Italy had become a nation, but was certainly not yet a power. This was also the period when Italian industrialisation took off. On an international level, Italy was by far the weakest of the other European powers, but in the eyes of the non-Europeans it was certainly one of the conquering powers. On the other hand, the colonial adventure was quickly used in Italy as one of the founding myths of the liberal state and the fascist regime that followed. Whatever your political orientation, whatever your religion or non-belief, whatever your social class, everybody got all worked up about the Overseas. Labanca writes of a "social imperialism" that implies an extremely close relationship between colonialism and the construction of a national identity.³³ The years of decolonization have brought a complete

³¹ Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane. 1935–1943. Dall'Impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta* [The Italian wars. 1935–1943. From the Ethiopian Empire to its overthrow] (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), xiv.

³² Nicola Labanca, *Storia dell'Italia coloniale* [History of colonial Italy] (Milan: Fenice 2000, 1994). He also wrote the entries on *Colonialismo; El Alamein, battaglia di; Etiopia, guerra di; Impero; Istituto coloniale italiano; Mediterraneo*; [Colonialism; El Alamein, battle of; Ethiopia, war of; Empire; Italian colonial institution; the Mediterranean] in the *Dizionario del fascismo* [Dictionary of fascism] (Turin: Einaudi, 2002).

³³ Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* [Overseas. History of Italian colonial expansion] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), 26; Labanca,

about-turn in historiographical reflection and introduced a different point of view. This is when the “colonial history” that sprung from the imperial conquests is transformed into “African and Asian stories”, giving voice to those who had been left unheard. And in recent years, historiographers have now arrived at the study of the “history of colonialism and decolonization”.

Decolonization is actually only one of the reasons behind this last step in the study process. History has now become multi-faceted and is forced to deal with many new subjects that all need to be heard: first of all, the feminist movement which has allowed the silent and absent voice of women to become protagonists and to write their pages; then a voice must be given to the lower classes, peasants and workers alike, who have always been viewed as the underdogs, and, last but not least, we have the young people, the soldiers, and all manner of other key players who can no longer be ignored.

To get back to the subject of our colonial possessions, despite the fact that they were extraordinarily poor, as well as geographically limited and short-lasting, the Overseas did play a decisive role in forming Italy as a nation and defining its group identity. After all, Italy’s history is a geographical and cultural mosaic that is made up of a myriad of pieces. One could even go as far as to say that Italy’s need for an Overseas was rather more essential in creating *Italy the nation*, than in bringing riches and power.

After the birth of the Republic, a veil of silence was consciously or unconsciously drawn over the whole matter. Maybe this was out of embarrassment or shame, or from a lack of understanding or even a way of washing one’s hands of any responsibility or blame. This cover-up went on, with the exception of the afore-mentioned Del Boca, until a new generation of historians arrived on the scene. The sons and daughters of 1968 brought a new way of understanding history and the Italian Overseas.

Nowadays, Labanca himself has divided the multiplicity of interpretations and research methods into five distinct areas: African history; the history of colonialism; documentary films and authentic material; the history of culture and literature, and post-colonial studies.³⁴

Una guerra per l’impero. Memorie della campagna d’Etiopia 1935–36 [War for the Empire. Memoirs of the Ethiopian Campaign 1935–36] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005), dedicated to the soldiers of the only fascist victory.

³⁴ Labanca himself has given a rip-roaring definition to these five research areas, calling them the “Movimento 5 stelle” [5 Star Movement]. Labanca, “Tendenze recenti degli studi italiani sul colonialismo,” [Recent trends in Italian Studies on