In Rome, walking from the historic center to the train station, one passes through a rather obscure piazza – the Piazza dei Cinquecento ['Plaza of the 500']. Erected in 1887, it was intended to commemorate the 500 Italian soldiers killed at Dogali (Ethiopia) earlier that same year. Yet the imposing, fascist Termini train station overshadows the piazza, and indeed, the piazza itself is often subsumed into the station’s geography. As such, this spatial example proves to be a poignant metaphor for the way that fascism has often come to overshadow Italian colonial historiography.

It seems to be the task of Giuseppe Maria Finaldi’s Italian National Identity in the Scramble for Africa (2009) to decouple colonialism and fascism, and to focus primarily on how a so-called „culture of colonialism” first developed in Italy during the late nineteenth-century. Finaldi defines his period of study vis-à-vis two important Italian military battles in Ethiopia-Dogali in 1887 and Adowa in 1896 - both defeats, but with very different consequences. The first battle, according to Finaldi, gave rise to a range of new associations, media, and ephemera that supported Italy’s colonial project. Yet this support abruptly ended with the defeat at Adowa where thousands of Italian troops died at the hands of a loosely organized Ethiopian army. In the historiography of modern Italy, the battle of Adowa is frequently cited as one of the most humiliating defeats of any European power on African soil, as well as the justification for Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1936.

The book is written in clear prose that is easily accessible to non-academics. It is divided into three parts that can be approximated as follows: 1) a theoretical introduction and review of the literature („Empire in Italy’s Age of Prose”), 2) a description of historical materials that demonstrate a linkage between Italian national identity and Italy’s colonial project („The Vehicles of Italy’s ‘Culture of Colonialism’”), and 3) an interpretation of the historical significance of the above materials („Themes and Meanings”). While this organization surely makes for easier writing, it can be frustrating for readers who desire synthetic analyses to be presented alongside historical descriptions, but instead must wait until the final three chapters of the book. There is also no index, which makes searching this work thematically quite difficult.

The aims of Finaldi’s study are admirable. He attempts to bring an assortment of rather unorthodox „vehicles” to bear on the study of early Italian colonialism, among them puppet shows, broadsheets, textbooks, exhibitions, social clubs, and others. Finaldi’s approach to Italian colonial east Africa draws heavily on the work done on the British and French cases, particularly that of Edward Said and John MacKenzie. What is more, the term „culture of colonialism” emerges as the lynchpin of Finaldi’s text, and he defines it as „the historical process which culturally elaborated and portrayed ideas that vindicated a particular period of European-Western socio-political-geographical expansion” (p. 45). In turn, as many other scholars of Italian colonialism have argued, he insists that the making of Italian national identity was intimately bound up with its colonial culture of this time period (pp. 45-46).

Although the aforementioned thesis does not offer much in terms of an original contribution to the scholarship on Italian colonialism, the strongest part of the book includes the nine chapters that describe these „vehicles” as mediators of Italy’s specific culture of colonialism. This detailed overview of primary sources would be helpful to any scholar interested in exploring the relationships between cultural productions in late-nineteenth century Italy and the development of Italy’s colonies. The chapters cover the following materials - newspapers; books and the publishing industry; broadsheets; novels, plays, and puppet shows; patriotic ephemera; schools and school textbooks; the local commune, clubs, and associations; the church; and the Eritrean display at the Palermo national exhibition. Indeed, Finaldi provides so much information that it would be difficult to...
analyze all of this material in any depth in a singular work. A more focused study of one or two „vehicles“ could have resulted in new insights beyond the evident linkage between Italian national identity and colonial culture.

Finaldi’s work is also helpful in pointing scholars toward the relevant scholarship on colonialism and nationalism written in Italian. The text clearly intends to follow in the footsteps of such noted Italian historians as Nicola Labanca and Angelo Del Boca, who all would agree have pioneered the field. However, what is gravely missing from this work is a familiarity with (and citation of) the important non-Italian scholarship on Italian colonialism, particularly that on east Africa. In particular, the volume edited by Patrizia Palumbo on Africa in Italian colonial culture (especially the chapters by Barbara Sòrgoni, Giulia Barrera, and Cristina Lombardi-Diop) would have been helpful in fine-tuning the author’s overall argument. 1 The reader on Italian colonialism edited by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller might have also been useful. 2

What is more, the text focuses on a so-called „culture of colonialism“ but does little to interrogate the idea of „culture.“ While it is understood that the scope of this study is primarily historical, the analysis of cultural productions, like newspapers and exhibitions, would be greatly enriched if it built on the important scholarship occurring in other disciplines, such as political science and anthropology. For instance, in the chapter on newspapers, the author’s case for the link between colonial culture and national identity would have been strengthened exponentially had it even mentioned Benedict Anderson’s watershed work, Imagined Communities, 3 for it is here that Anderson shows that the newspaper (or print-as-commodity) was fundamental to the origins of national consciousness (pp. 9-36). In other disciplines, the text could have benefitted from the work done by Nicholas Thomas in anthropology on „colonialism’s culture“ 4 as well as Timothy Mitchell on the everyday details of the colonial project in the metropole. 5

Moreover, this study would be enhanced by the further contextualization of the Italian colonial project, even if just in the conclusion. For instance, how do these materials fit in with later colonizing strategies in Libya, Rhodes and the Dodecanese, Tianjin, Albania, and Italian East Africa (Africa Orientale Italiana)?

As mentioned before, the overall aims of Finaldi’s study are admirable, and this book will be a good resource for scholars looking for primary sources that demonstrate a linkage between cultural production and the early stages of Italian colonialism in Africa.


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