

## ***Il colonialismo degli italiani. Storia di un'ideologia***

**by Emanuele Ertola, Rome, Carocci, 2022, 191 pp., €19.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-290-1505-4**

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Emanuele Ertola's *Il colonialismo degli italiani. Storia di un'ideologia* represents an original and thorough analysis of the birth, growth, and later developments of the Italian discourse over the *Oltremare*. Employing a wide range of sources (from journal articles to personal diaries, parliamentary speeches and travelogues), the book successfully reconstructs the diachronic evolution of one of the most effective devices of legitimisation of Italian expansion in Africa, linking together the debate on emigration and the spread of a peculiar strand of 'settler ideology' in Italy.

The work opens with the immediate aftermath of unification and ends in 2019 with Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Manlio Di Stefano's claim that Italians 'don't have a colonial tradition, nor have they ever dropped bombs on anyone' (p. 157). Such a *longue durée* perspective allows the book to profitably follow the evolution of the set of tropes constituting Italian colonial ideology throughout the different political conjunctures in which it operated. However, loyal to the methodology detailed in the introduction, Ertola does not limit his work to a *histoire des mentalités*, but constantly puts the public intellectual debate in dialogue with 'the numbers and the outcomes they produced' in practice (p. 14).

The book is organised into five chronologically oriented chapters, enriched by an ample bibliography and a remarkably useful name index. The first chapter, evocatively entitled *La nascita di un'idea*, traces the Italian colonial ideology back to the moment when a recently unified Italy started to seriously consider the option of overseas expansion. After briefly summarising a few early attempts to install penal colonies in the Indian Ocean, Ertola reconstructs the historical conjuncture in which 'the idea of combining colonies and emigration within the same discourse began to take form' in Italy (p. 17). More importantly, this chapter examines the debate on emigration in post-unification Italy, highlighting its indebtedness to neo-Malthusian ideas. Expanding on the concept of 'Malthusian imperialism' developed in reference to the Japanese context, Ertola indicates how colonial expansion began in the 1860s and 1870s to be increasingly promoted as the solution to 'overpopulation and unemployment in metropolitan society' (p. 22).

The second chapter, devoted to the last years of the nineteenth century up to the invasion of Libya, gets to the heart of the argument, following the transformation of an *in nuce* idea into a proper, if highly contradictory, ideological formation. It was, in fact, with the first settlement projects in Eritrea in the 1880s that colonial expansion and the social question were definitively fused. Moreover, demonstrating a remarkable ability to move between different sources and levels of analysis, Ertola devotes several pages to the various layers of the debate, taking into consideration both colonial and anti-colonial stances. Conducting a thorough investigation of the political arena (from liberals to socialists and right-wing reactionaries), this chapter also offers a morphological description of settler ideology, isolating the tropes structuring it. According to Ertola, such tropes were articulated on a double level: the emptiness of the lands to be conquered, and the richness of their soils.

The third chapter, *La terra promessa*, expands on the encounter between settler ideology and the newly born nationalistic movement. Examining the cultural discourse surrounding the conquest of the Libyan territories, it highlights how tropes originally developed in reference to the Horn of Africa were reapplied to the Mediterranean basin. Ertola underlines how settler projects had suffered a major setback following the defeat at Adwa. However, with the ‘Tripoline intoxication’ (p. 85) of 1911–12, such projects resurfaced, this time in terms of a promised land awaiting the arrival (better, the return) of Italian civilisation.

Unsurprisingly, this chapter marks the transition towards the Fascist period and the consequent rearticulation of the major tropes of settler ideology. Specifically, as described in chapter four, Fascism appropriated the population projects of the liberal period, but gave them new meaning in two ways. Primarily, Fascism built its own image in opposition to the inefficacy of the liberal period. If, as stated by Ertola, the Italians that had permanently settled in Eritrea were ‘very few’ (p. 69), Fascism attributed such failure to the political system that preceded it, thus recognising the legitimacy of such plans and, at the same time, distancing itself from their poor results. More importantly, the Fascist rearticulation of settler ideology built on a new understanding of the problem of overpopulation. Rejecting the theoretical apparatus of neo-Malthusianism, in fact, Fascism recognised richness rather than a limit in the surplus of population, ‘turning supernumerary from vice to virtue’ (p. 102). Finally, and especially after the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, the regime identified the colonies as the ideal space or promised land in which the New Fascist Man was to be born.

It was in this context that the trope of the good Italian worker took a central place in the colonial discourse, later transmigrating, at least in some of its features, to postwar Italy. The fifth and last chapter is dedicated to ‘the long heritage of the Republic’ and to the legacies of settler ideology within a country of ‘colonialists without colonies’ (p. 137). Drawing from institutional sources and popular culture, this last chapter dwells on the contradictory (or absent) memories of the *Oltremare* in a country, such as Italy, that has been unable to confront its colonial past.

Ertola’s work successfully offers a re-reading of Italian overseas expansion from a cultural and political perspective. Although certain elements remain uncovered (such as the different forms of racialisation undergone by the emigration process), *Il colonialismo degli italiani* represents a long-awaited and necessary contribution to the study of Italian colonial culture.

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## **Remembering Italian America: Memory, Migration, Identity**

**by Laurie and Michael Buonanno, New York, Routledge, 2021, 274 pp., \$49.95 (paperback), ISBN 9780367514693.**

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In *Remembering Italian America: Memory, Migration, Identity*, Laurie and Michael Buonanno combine memoir with a historical, sociological, and political examination of Italians in