

A DENIED REALITY? FORCED LABOUR IN ITALIAN COLONIES IN NORTHEAST AFRICA

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Introduction

Within the broader context of studies dealing with Italian colonialism in Northeast Africa, a striking aspect is the silence about the issue of forced labour. In Italy, after decades of protracted silence on the colonial past, the new historiography is now giving increasing attention to the study of colonialism and of the role played by Italy in its former colonies. This promising flourishing of studies has allowed Italian and foreign scholars to partially fill the deep historiographic gap accumulated by Italy on this subject. However, in spite of the great deal of research production dealing with sundry issues such as gender, race, infrastructures, religion and economic activities, the issue of forced labour continues to be somehow embarrassingly disregarded.

The silence on this subject indirectly tends to strengthen the traditional thesis developed by the Italian colonial discourse, which depicts the Italian experience as an anomalous phenomenon, marked by the absence of violence and exploitation (the theory epitomised in the stereotype of the so-called *colonialismo buono* or good colonialism). According to this conventional representation, Italian administrators would not have resorted to forced labour as this was contrary to the

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Italian colonial legislation and also because there was not shortage of labour in colonial territories.

The persistence of historiographic silence on what is normally one of the most frequently noticed practices in colonial societies, together with the relative silence of colonial sources on this matter, is the starting point for this paper. In fact, this lack of information requires both a methodological review of the topic under discussion and a more general approach, questioning the reasons behind so deep a silence.

To this end, the first part of this paper is devoted to a critical assessment of the available sources, such as archival documents, newspapers and magazines, iconographic materials, *memoirs* and correspondences of Italian colonial administrators and settlers. Capitalising on this theoretical framework will allow us to discuss the widespread theory of the absence of forced labour in Italian colonies, and compare it with the evidence, even if scant, of a different actual *praxis*. In the deconstruction of colonial sources, a critical role will be played by the use of primary sources, where it is sometimes possible to find reference to the topic in question, particularly for what concerns Somalia. This will balance the otherwise predominant voice of colonialism and, therefore, address the controversial issue of forced labour from a different perspective. In so doing, we will mainly concentrate on the fascist period, for a twofold consideration: on the one hand, more material is available; on the other, the colonialism in the liberal period of the peninsula is widely considered as a scarcely organised experience, fostered more by some sort of foreign coincidence than backed by the internal leadership, characterised by a 'confused' management, whereas the fascist regime strongly fought for and ruled its 'place under the sun' in a much more systematised way.

The quest for a 'bigger Italy'

According to the conventional colonial representation, referred to both the liberal and the fascist period, Italian administrators wouldn't ever have resorted to forced labour for two reasons: on the one hand, because this was contrary to the Italian colonial legislation and, on the

other, because there was not shortage of labour in colonial territories. This second factor was mainly motivated following the supposed nature of the colonies themselves, which were meant to give work to the Italian population, otherwise filling the ships heading to Ellis Island.

As a matter of fact, Italian colonies were not what, at a glance, would appeal as verdant, mysterious and full of hidden riches to be exploited pieces of land, where ample cohorts of strong black slaves could grow cocoa, coffee or mine gold for a handful of bored white men in colonial attire. On the contrary, the 'Promised Land' often revealed a reality of extreme difficulties, scarce resources, and non-existent investments. Italy was said to 'have Africa at home'; surely it did not act as a cohesive, strong power towards its colonies, but for repression.

Generally speaking, the pre-fascist colonial experience appears to be rather disorganised. Although the degree of continuity between liberal and fascist colonialism is widely debated, historians agree on a 'upgrading' in the fascist experience. Aruffo speaks of 'superficiality' and 'improvisation', when he discusses the management of the colonies in the liberal Italy.³ Indeed, the economic weakness of Italy, then just past its unification, somehow did not allow to allocate a sufficient amount of resources to the ruling of the recently conquered colonies. It is widely agreed that behind the decision of acquiring them considerations of power politics played a far more important role than economic ones. The colonial dream had its christening at the Berlin Congress, when Italy obtained the British approval for its expansion in the Red Sea. Actually the Italian colonial expansion in Africa has been defined as 'an accident of the British policies': the UK decided that it desired, in the area, a weak partner, unlikely to cause it any troubles, and proceeded to encourage it, dispensing diplomatic and even practical help. In fact, Italian colonial problems originated mainly in Italian

³ Aruffo, Alessandro, *Storia del colonialismo italiano. Da Crispi a Mussolini*. Datanews, Roma 2003.

⁴ Quoted in Labanca, Nicola, *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*. Il Mulino, Bologna 2002, p.62.

management. Monzali describes the economic approach towards the colonies as 'minimalist': resources were saved as much as possible, few infrastructures were built: overall, the value of the colonies was political, not economic, which was translated in a substantial confusion and even indifference regarding their management.⁵

Indeed, the balance of the liberal colonialism is widely recognised as entirely negative. While violence was widespread and acute, the economic valorisation of the colonies was disregarded. The degree of continuity between liberal and fascist colonialism is debatable (and widely debated). Generally speaking, everything, with the advent of fascism, became much more organised. Violence was now used in a thoroughly systematic way (it is worth, in particular, mentioning the use of gas and of concentration camps). Ethiopia and Libya, both during and after the campaigns for their conquest, were victims of a distinctively cruel treatment. Race laws significantly worsened the natives' living conditions. However, a differentiation must be made among the different colonies. As above mentioned, Libya first and Ethiopia afterwards were surely the territories in which the worst crimes were committed. Gas was widely used, Italy's ratification of the international ban on the use of gas notwithstanding, and concentration camps Somalia and Eritrea were during the fascism seen more as a source of prestige; the former, in its rare fertile areas, was also used to test an agriculture of plantation. The latter, on the contrary, was increasingly seen as a base for the conquest of Ethiopia and, exploiting the resentment for the former rulers, as a reservoir of soldiers (called *ascari*). Overall, even if the fascist colonialism was more organised and efficient, it failed its objectives. It succeeded, it is true, to achieve the actual conquest of both Ethiopia and Libya; it did not, however, transform any of the colonies in the emigrants' recipient which had been so long sought, nor was it able to turn the colonies in the source of any riches.

⁵ Monzali, Luciano, *Politica ed economia nel colonialismo africano dell'Italia fascista*, "CLIO, rivista trimestrale di studi storici", 2001, n.3, pp.405-463.

Italian colonies and forced labour: a literature review

Primary and secondary sources alike are generally silent about the issue of forced labour in both the Liberal and the Fascist period of the Italian colonialism. N° 917, issued on April the 27th, 1935 stated that every native, without distinctions, *could be* forced to work. In theory, the obligation to work was supposed to be transitory, to be applied for a maximum period of sixty days, only for males between 18 and 45 years old, and exclusively for works of public utility; nonetheless, it is nowadays widely agreed that those limitations were more often than not disregarded, and forced labour used every time workers were needed. However, although the 'new' historiography, particularly after the '90s, generally lists this widespread use of forced labour among the re-discovered Italian colonial crimes, evidence is rarely, or never, given. Available colonial sources, furthermore, present a compact front denying any such practice in the Italian colonies. The material regarding forced labour is, in the liberal period, acutely scarce.

Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning the problem of the slave trade. The Italian state took directly charge of the Benadir colony, in 1905, because of a scandal involving several officers of the Company which beforehand managed the concession, involved in the slave trade. This did not affect the public debate, which continued to depict the superior mission absolved by the Italians, giving as a clear example the abolition of the traffic, mission assumedly fulfilled at the moment of the conquest.

De Martino, who ruled Somalia between 1916 and 1919, recognised the existence of a shortage of labour in the colony, particularly for what concerned agriculture, which used to be an activity destined exclusively to slaves; it was, consequently, culturally difficult to encourage people to work in this sector. He acknowledged the wide use of forced labour made by other colonialist powers to overcome similar problems; nevertheless, he defended the view that similar practices were never in use in Italian territories, nor he thought they ever would. In fact, he was convinced that 'the reasons of work' would very easily be taught to the communities of Somalia.⁶

De Martino's relate apart, though, natives' labour is a subject that does not enter the colonial literature of Italy in the Liberal period. The public debate concentrates on the opportunity of the conquest itself. Although in this period it is possible to find many commentators defending deeply anti-colonialist positions, those convinced of the unlawfulness of colonialism itself were a meagre minority. The anti-colonialist discourse mainly rotated around the economic wisdom of embarking in colonial adventures, for a nation scarcely unified; also, the 'civilising mission' was contested, since three quarters of the Italian population itself were at the time badly in need of civilisation: illiterates, or quasi-illiterates, and in a situation of extreme poverty.⁷ The natives' condition, on the contrary, was never seriously under discussion, unless under the opposite stereotypes of the savage, innocent or fierce. The situation of labour in the construction of the little infrastructures that were built, for instance, particularly the Eritrea railways, is unclear. Natives were widely involved; Turchi, for instance, estimates that 3000 Eritreans were employed only in the stretch between Mai Atal and Ghinda, whereas in the same sector the Italians employed were only 300.⁸ Officially, however, force was not involved in the quest for labour: as we saw, De Martino defended the colonisers' success in making the natives understand the utility that such works would have brought to themselves. In 1903 a law was issued, forbidding anyone to impose work to indigenous populations, 'unless explicitly allowed to do so by the government'.⁹ As it appears clearly, at the best it can be said that forced labour did not have a clear legal status, nor did it attract any considerable attention; this, however, responds to the general condition of the colonies before fascism: unclear, confused, deprived of clear general guidelines.

⁶ De Martino, Giacomo, *La Somalia Italiana nei tre anni del mio governo*, Tipografia Camera dei deputati, Roma 1912.

⁷ Rainero, Romain, *L'anticolonialismo italiano da Assab ad Adua (1869-1896)*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano 1971.

⁸ Turchi, Gian Guido, *Treni Italiani d'Eritre.*, ETR, Roma 2003.

⁹ R.D. 28 May 1903, art.17 and 18. Quoted in Cucinotta, Ernesto. *Diritto coloniale italiano*, 2da edizione, Società editrice del 'Foro italiano', Roma 1933.

Although a certain degree of continuity has been remarked between liberal and fascist Italian colonialism, important difference must be highlighted. For one, much more attention was paid to the colonies, now clearly seen not only as source of prestige, but increasingly as potential recipient for the emigration too. This theme was not absent from the precedent governments; it did, however, find a new systematisation with the advent of fascism. Consequently, much more literature during fascism was dedicated to the study of the condition of the colonies; the powerful machine of propaganda was set, to organise support for both the re-conquest of Libya (the 'first' conquest, dated 1911, did not bring to the actual control of much of the Libyan territory) and the conquest of Ethiopia, and for colonialism in general; among its goals, priority was given to the dream of a colonialism of settlement, with the objective of diverting emigration from America to Italian Africa. Thus, although much more material is available for the fascist colonial experience, its objectivity is more than ever doubtful; and even if the condition of the natives is sometimes discussed, it is to demonstrate the paradigm of the good colonialist, who uses violence only as a benevolent father.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the problems linked to labour do emerge in some of the material. Onor, long active in Somalia, in 1925 clearly indicated the existing difficulties in finding labour force in Benadir, where land was abundant, and salaries needed to be rather elevate to divert workers from their own fields. He described the pre-colonial economic system, based on slavery, as much more efficient, and listed all the difficulties linked to the abolition of slavery. He clearly indicated as, in order to transform the colony and make it productive, it was necessary for the state to invest resources to build infrastructures and to constitute plantations, for which it should have resorted to forced labour.¹¹

¹⁰ For the image of the coloniser as a father, see among others Giaccardi, Alberto, *Dieci anni di fascismo nelle colonie italiane*, A. Mondadori editore, Milano 1934.

¹¹ Onor, Romolo, *La Somalia italiana. Esame critico dei problemi di economia rurale e di politica economica della colonia.*, Fratelli Bocca ed., Torino 1925, particularly p. 226.

In 1931, in a text entirely dedicated to colonial forced labour, Mondaini complained about the absence of relevant material for what concerned the Italian case. He recalled the already mentioned 1903 law about the possibility of using forced labour for works of public interest; however, he described its practical applications, in Eritrea, as 'extremely rare'. In Somalia, where written law did not exist, he highlighted as custom allowed forced labour, if paid, for the construction and mending of streets. In Libya, on the contrary, forced labour did not exist at all.¹² Mondaini saw the free labour of natives as the key to make colonies more valuable, and indicated both Eritrea and Somalia as examples of this. He trusted the natives' capability for improvement; defended the view that both the construction of the Eritrea railway and the agrarian development of Somalia had been possible thanks to the labour freely given by indigenous populations, force never being necessary. This opinion is shared by Gravelli, who vehemently defended the view that natives could and should be gradually educated to work freely, since forced labour could not advance the goal of economic development.¹³

Mondaini's book is, for what concerns other colonialist states, lengthy and well informed. He categorised forced labour as direct (*corvée*) and indirect, the second category including laws against vagrancy, requisition of land, taxation as a way of forcing to work, obligation to give goods. For all these instances he discussed practical applications, with examples from French, Portuguese, British and German colonies; in his view, however, Italian colonialism was different, and as we saw, did not need to resort to force.

The same author, a few years later¹⁴, significantly after the conquest of the fertile land of Ethiopia, reinforced his ideas and took an even

¹² Mondaini, Gennaro e Cabrini, Antonio. *L'evoluzione del lavoro nelle colonie e la Società delle Nazioni*. CEDAM, Padova 1931.

¹³ Gravelli, Asvero a cura di. *Africa. Espansionismo fascista e revisionismo*. Edizioni Nuova Europa, Roma 1933.

¹⁴ Mondaini, Gennaro. *I problemi del lavoro nell' Impero*. "Rassegna Economica dell'Africa Italiana", pp.747-82, anno 25, n. 6, 1937.

clearer stand for the resort to native free labour, forced or not. In a paternalistic vision of the local population, coercive forms of labour were seen as applicable, but for the common good, because this would have improved and 'civilised' both the land and its inhabitants. Since a '*colonizzazione di popolamento*', by white settlers, small farmers and businessmen, formerly soldiers of the Italian army to whom land was given for free after the military campaign, was not feasible any longer because of the harshness of the climate, high costs and dangers, the Mother country would eventually have to resort to a '*colonizzazione tropicale di sfruttamento*' as the other colonial powers had already applied. In other words, when the exterminate lands of Ethiopia had been occupied, Mondaini called for Italy a track of development close to the model implemented by other countries, with a even more widespread use of natives' labour, forced or not, depending on the state's needs for a better development and exploitation of the land. This should have been well supervised and organised by the government, responsible to keep its manpower alive, and even to increase its number. The principal role of the colony was to offer low price rough material for the Motherland at any cost, as English and French colonies already did.

As a matter of fact, in 1933 the jurist Cucinotta did recognise the existence of forced labour in all the Italian colonies.¹⁵ He highlighted as it was mainly intended as a punishment, and thus belonged to the realm of criminal law. *Corvées*, on the contrary, in his opinion weren't but scarcely in use, and when so, only for works of public interest, and for a few days in the year. 'The offer of indigenou work is sufficient, the recruitment easy, every work relation wholly voluntary'.¹⁶ This, notwithstanding the fact that law did not discipline any aspect of labour, neither for what concerned labour conditions (minimum age, length of the working day, etc.), nor for what concerned salaries.

¹⁵ Cucinotta, Ernesto. *Diritto coloniale italiano*. 2da edizione. Società editrice del 'Foro italiano', Roma 1933.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p.489.

In Somalia's more fertile region, between 1924 and 1928, under the term served by De Vecchi as governor, many important works of drainage and land redevelopment were realised. The aim was to proceed with the installation of new agrarian companies, but mainly to develop the one that already existed: the experimental station of Genale, created in 1911 by Onor, then agrarian counsellor of the colonial government. Vast quantities of resources were destined to this goal by De Vecchi. Some 40,000 hectares were divided in 83 concessions, assigned by the governor, as highlighted by Del Boca, to improvised colonisers, whose only quality was that of being part of a group called '*Pionieri Fascisti di Torino*' (Turin' Fascist pioneers) and of having followed De Vecchi in Somalia.¹⁷ This rather heterogeneous group, composed by different socio-economic categories, but not including farmers, strongly defended the system of concessions, mainly based on the exploitation of indigenous labour. Indigenous working force, in fact, was assured to those who benefit of a concession, together with fiscal aids, land, and other production incentives. The condition of the natives could reasonably be assimilated to that of forced labour. However, this can be deduced only through the words of Marcello Serrazanetti, who sent his *memoirs* to Rome from Somalia, where he covered the position of secretary of the National Fascist Party.¹⁸ Serrazanetti was obliged to leave the colony after only two years (1929/'30) for disagreements with the colonial *élite*. Considering the huge difference between his memoirs and the current colonial discourse, this is hardly surprising. Serrazanetti, in fact, presented a portrait of Somalia which is rather harsh on the colonisers. In his opinion, contrarily to all the mainstream *clichés*, labour was scarce in Somalia; the population, reluctant to work.

This analysis well fits in the situation that Fage and Roland described as the 'crux' of African development. Workforce, in their reading, was scarce since necessity did not drive workers, who already possessed the means of subsistence in a context of essentially self-sufficient societies with limited needs. High rewards and wages could

¹⁷ Del Boca, Angelo. *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*. Laterza, Roma 1976.

¹⁸ Serrazanetti, Marcello. *Considerazioni sulla nostra attività coloniale in Somalia*. Tipografia La Rapida, Bologna 1933.

not be offered because in most cases this would eliminate profit; moreover, if wages increased, this would actually reduce the amount of labour offered. This 'paradox' fostered the creation of the myth of the Africans as 'irrational' and 'lazy' (they do not want to work, regardless the wage). The only solution was to deprive Africans of the means of subsistence, such as land, leaving the young men compelled to look for work.¹⁹

Serrazanetti despised the deceitfulness of juridical 'show-offs' as the '*equo contratto bilaterale*' (fair bilateral contract) introduced in Somalia in 1928. He criticised the abolition of slavery, trumpeted too soon in an economy beforehand completely based on slaves. He argued that the economic valorisation of the colony required forced labour; but that those contracts deprived the workers of any form of protection. In 1930, the governor of Somalia Corni officially praised the new contracts, that 'contributed to the welfare of the individuals freely employed'.²⁰ Serrazanetti, however, forcefully defended an opposite view. He described forced labour as a common reality in Somalia, only 'cynically disguised', and as a condition far worse than slavery, because 'when the government provides for free new workers when some die or escape, the worker does not have any value at all'.²¹ He denounced the common practice of reducing the food ration in a half to push natives to work.

Some of the abuses were officially recognised: in 1930, a circular letter was issued, denouncing the concessionaires, who were guilty of lack of respect of 'laws and principles of humanity'.²² The letter mirrored many of Serrazanetti's criticism, but did not bring any consequences, because of protests and menaces of the lobby of concessionaires. In particular, this letter complained of some widespread habits, such as

¹⁹ Fage, J. D. and Roland, Oliver ed. *The Cambridge History of Africa*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, vol. 6 (1870-1905) and vol. 7 (1905-1940).

²⁰ Corni, Guido. *Relazione ufficiale alla Camera*. Regia stamperia della colonia, Mogadiscio 1930, pp.14-15.

²¹ Serrazanetti, Marcello. *Op. Cit.*, p.9.

²² Barile, Mario. *Circolare di pubblica ragione*, Regio commissariato della regione del centro della Somalia Italiana, Merca 12 settembre 1930.

depriving the natives of the use of land, food and medicines, cheating them on their salaries, and using violence.

Serrazanetti thoroughly criticised this system, mainly on the belief that in Somalia forced labour was not useful, its only goal being that of sustaining the private economy of concessionaires, which was by him labelled as premature and mistaken in its approach, and consequently destined to fail.²³ In every other aspect, Serrazanetti perfectly shares the colonisers' prejudices: his racism in considering the natives is thorough, as is his support for the idea of forced labour. Consequently, it is reasonable to trust his relate about the conditions of indigenous workers in Somalia, more than the official discourse depicting them as wholly satisfactory. Nonetheless, his voice remains the only one, at his time, to overtly challenge that discourse. Even though the Italian 'empire' was defined as an 'empire of labour',²⁴ the actual conditions of workers were never under discussion.

As we saw, there is, in Italy, a 'new historiography' which refuses the stereotypes linked to the good colonialism discourse, and addresses the Italian colonial experience with objectivity. Forced labour is now commonly listed among Italian practices, which ranged from concentration camps, to plundering, to violence of many sorts. Some of these crimes have been widely documented. Particularly striking has been the research regarding the use of poisonous gas in Libya and Ethiopia, core of an enflamed debate during the 1990s.²⁵ The first scholar to address the issue of Italian colonialism from an unbiased point of view has been Roberto Battaglia, who in 1958 gave a critical reconstruction of the starts of Italian colonisation in Eritrea, first breaking the otherwise compact front of colonial studies.²⁶ The book aroused, indeed, violent reactions, as did other text which enlarged the realm of research;

²³ Serrazanetti, Marcello. *Op. cit.*, p.20.

²⁴ Mondaini, Gennaro. *I problemi del lavoro nell'Impero*. Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Roma 1937.

²⁵ See for instance Del Boca, Angelo ed. *I gas di Mussolini. Il Fascismo e la guerra d'Etiopia*. Editori Riuniti, Roma 1996.

²⁶ Battaglia, Roberto. *La prima guerra d'Africa*. Einaudi, Torino 1958.

particularly by Rochat, who studied in particular the crimes committed in Libya and Ethiopia,²⁷ and Del Boca, who read his research as a 'long battle for the truth'.²⁸ These authors represent the pioneers of a new generation of historians who do not accept the precedent rhetoric surrounding the Italian colonialist experience. Historical studies about the colonial period today address many related issues, duly following rules of objectivity.

Indeed, the stereotype of the good colonialism has been easy to contradict. Abundant evidence has been uncovered about the crimes committed during the Italian colonialist experience: lagers, for instance, mainly for the Arab resistance in Libya, and during the so-called operation of colonial police in Ethiopia in 1937, and widespread violence. In Libya, the common practice was to destroy the natives' livestock, with the practical result of obliging them to work for the oppressor, or else starve. However, although virtually all of these 'new' historians at least quote the use of forced labour, none of them has yet given any precise evidence on the matter.²⁹ Without any doubts, there is still a significant amount of archive material that waits to be examined. A more economic approach would probably be needed to evaluate accurately issues linked with labour. Overall, however, at the present day the denial surrounding the use of forced labour in Italian colonies still continues unaffected.

Three hypothesis behind a denial

Although the new historiographic material tends to refuse the 'good colonialism' stereotype, and often points to the use of forced labour in the African colonies, it is generally silent about any evidence to support this statement. Having reviewed the available sources on the topic, the

²⁷ Rochat, Giorgio. *Il colonialismo italiano. Documenti*. Loesher, Torino 1973; *L'impiego dei gas nella guerra d'Etiopia 1935-36*. Loescher, Torino 1988; *Omar al-Mukhtar e la riconquista fascista della Libia*. Marzorati, Milano 1981.

²⁸ Quoted in Aruffo, Alessandro. *Storia del colonialismo italiano. Da Crispi a Mussolini*. Datanews, Roma 2003, p.148.

²⁹ See Aruffo, Alessandro. *Op. cit.*, Labanca, Nicola. *Storia dell'Italia coloniale*. Fenice 2000, Milano 1994, Monzali, Luciano. *Op. cit.*

second part of this paper will thus regard the reason why the issue of forced labour, and of indigenous labour in general, is so completely disregarded. How is it possible that a reality so crucial in other colonialist experiences has been totally denied in the Italian case, and even when, more recently, is not so, not properly investigated?

The answer to this question, i. e. the denial of the forced labour, can be articulated around three main points.

First, the 'denial' has flourished thanks to the widespread image of *'italiani brava gente*, or "Italians are good people", one of the most rhetoric and overused refrain of a still popular propaganda. The concept itself is a clear instance of 'invention of tradition', and as such is shared by other colonialist powers as well (the French spoke of *douceur coloniale*, the British of benevolent empire).³⁰ In Italy, however, the dominant discourse of the good colonialism has not yet been fully challenged, due to a gigantic gap both in the Italian collective memory and historiography.

The colonial experience itself has often been denied, directly or through the stereotype of a different kind of colonialism: bloodless, benevolent, and consecrated to a superior civilising mission of the "new" Roman Empire, not only under *dux* Benito Mussolini, but also represented by the post-WWII Republican Italy. Although historians have nowadays refused this image, research has just started. There is a huge problem relative to the colonial archives, which after the end of Fascism have been run by the same *gattopardo* management for very long years.

Moreover, as we merely touched in the previous lines, the desire of all the protagonists of the post-war political arena to keep the colonies in Italian hands despite the defeat contributed to a widespread defence of the superior civilising mission that the Italians were said to have led in the conquest and ruling of their African empire. Overall the brevity of

³⁰ Labanca, Nicola. *Oltremare. Op. cit.*

the colonial experience itself, and its abrupt end, led to a missed decolonisation of the study of the Italian colonialism³¹. In other words a missed purge of both the cornerstones of the Fascist colonial experience and of the group of people –managers, scholars and politicians- working on the colonial issues during the *Ventennio* led directly to a continuation of the good colonialism discourse in great part of the Republican period till nowadays.³² Although this worrisome aspect has been challenged more and more over the recent years, thanks to a full panoply of different minded approach, the issue of forced labour still waits for its time to be uncovered by sound studies and research work.

The second reason of the denial of forced labour in the Italian colonies is more blurred, and more similar to other colonial experiences. Labanca stresses how racism was inherent to colonialism itself, but speaks of a radicalisation in the Italian case.³³ The issue of forced labour does not appear in the words of colonisers, because their racism didn't allow them to recognise the *Other*, the "indigenous" inhabitant of the conquered and civilized land as a real person. Even in the huge collection of memoirs collected by Labanca, which includes relates from the most heterogeneous sample of colonisers, the work of indigenous populations does never appear. Actually, natives enter those memoirs only as prostitutes, rebellious, or touches of *pittoresco*.³⁴ As a matter of fact, the popular iconography of the "natives", so widespread in the mostly illiterate Fascist Italy, thanks to some delightful *Domenica del Corriere* pictures, never shows Africans *really* working. Black people could be depicted in the white livery as *autista*, *barista* or *cameriere*³⁵ (driver, bartender and maid) near the Italian family their work for, but for a comical purpose, just as a funny caricature, a masquerade of an "animal" dressing up like a human being. Or, as it clearly appears in

³¹ Del Boca, Angelo. *Le conseguenze per l'Italia del mancato dibattito sul colonialismo*.

³² Labanca, Nicola. *Politica e amministrazione coloniali dal 1922 al 1934*. In Collotti, Enzo. *Fascismo e politica di potenza. Politica estera 1922-1939*. La Nuova Italia, Milano 2000, pp.81-136.

³³ Labanca, Nicola. *Oltremare*. *Op. cit.*, p.441.

³⁴ Labanca, Nicola. *Posti al sole: diari e memorie di vita e di lavoro dalle colonie d'Africa*. Museo Storico Italiano della guerra, Rovereto 2001.

³⁵ The Italian terms are still in use in Eritrea and Somalia for designing these jobs.

some pseudo-ethnographic pictures, locals are shot with their traditional work-tools only in order to show the primitiveness and simplicity of their useless techniques.³⁶ A further justification for the colonization by the skilled heirs of Julius Caesar and Leonardo.

It is clear, thus, that the debate concerning the colonial adventure is focused on the riches that can, or cannot be gained in the adventure, on the prestige that the Italian nation will gain in front of the other colonial powers: considerations about the situation/the status of the natives never find any place during the colonial experience.

What is particularly striking, though, is that this denial continues even when the other colonialist states engage in a debate about rights of self-determination, which cannot take place in the Fascist Italy especially in the second part of the *Ventennio*, when the racial laws issued following the German example, institutionalised and to some extent deepened the degree of racism underlying the relationships between the Italians and the natives.

Unfortunately, this racist attitude of denying the native populations any kind of skills in labour (as well as any kind of human feeling!) was not significantly challenged even at the end of the regime, when the will of maintaining the Empire of the Republican movement won't change too much Mussolini's era political discourse about the attitude towards the colonised.

Finally, and more particularly referred to the Italian experience: the denial of the forced labour responds to a more general denial of any kind of exploitation of the colonised by the coloniser. As we said, the Italian colonialism has long been presented as a colonialism of settlement, allegedly diverting Italian emigration from the Americas to Africa. Consequently, it has been argued, indigenous labour was not needed, since conquered land was to be worked by Italians. This factor is intimately related to the image of good colonialism, and lends it a solid justification: the civilising mission appears evident when one thinks

³⁶ See for instance the photographic book *Del Boca, Angelo e Labanca, Nicola, L'impero africano del fascismo nelle fotografie dell'istituto Luce*. Editori Riuniti, Roma 2002.

of the colonies as a future part of the Nation, destined to be inhabited by its citizens. However, although the Italian colonial discourse is all permeated by the myth of the Roman *miles colonus* –or soldier that gets his piece of soil and start working it, spreading his culture in a barbarian land its reality is at least doubtful, when not manifestly false. Even in Libya, where the demographic experience was the most successful, the colonization by Italian settlers never reached the planned extent - and it was mainly concentrated in the capital, Tripoli, so it did not dramatically changed the agricultural pattern of the country. In the other colonies, due to a variety of reasons, the demographic colonization was a total failure. Its high costs led the colonial rulers to revert to more 'classical' forms of colonialism, more focused on capitalistic agriculture, where forced labour was most probably exploited. Taddia, however, stresses how the 'intention' of colonialism never allowed the development of a proper capitalist agriculture.³⁷ The public discourse, nonetheless, remained obstinately fixed on its claim that Italian colonies were destined to Italian immigrants.

Those factors concurred to strengthen the denial, leaving the issue of forced labour uninvestigated. It must be stressed, then, that we are presenting here are just first results of a preliminary survey on an otherwise extremely complex and still little investigated aspect of Italian colonialism. More research work especially on primary sources is hoped to be carried out in the future, keeping in mind the guiding points just highlighted in this paper.

³⁷ Taddia, Irma. *Eritrea colonia 1890-1952 : paesaggi, strutture, uomini del colonialismo*. Angeli, Milano 1986.

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