

The “lost colony”: Italian colonial irredentism (1864-1912)

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the place that Tunisia held in Italian colonial imaginary from the Majba Revolt (1864) until the Italo-Turkish War (1912). The main interest is to point out how geography, and geographical imagination, has been used as a colonial tool to legitimate the imperialist aims of Italy over Tunisian Regency and secondly to Tripoli. Tunisia occupied a particular status of an ‘unredeemed’ colony, linking the nationalist irredentist narration of the North-Eastern Italian border with the colonialist one on the Southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Starting from speeches and declarations of geographers, politicians and policymakers of the second half of 19th century, this research uses the writings of nationalist intellectuals and politician of the 1910s that played a major role in Italian public opinion to encourage the war against the Ottoman Empire. The paper aims to demonstrate not only the importance of geographical imagination in legitimating colonial ambitions but also the pivotal role of foreign colonial spaces in the imperialist imaginary of other metropolises as, in this case study, the place of the French protectorate of Tunisia in Italian colonialism.

Keywords

Tunisia, Italy, irredentism, migration, colonialism, Libya

Colonial imaginary and imperial geography

Since the very beginning of postcolonial studies, geographical production and imagination have been underlined as fundamental aspects in understanding the spatial and cultural dimension of colonialism (Said 1978; Idem 1993). Following this interest, scholars have often analyzed the colonial geographical relation between metropolis and ‘its’ colonies (Jazeel 2012; Blais, Deprest and Singaravélou 2011; Finaldi 2009; Proglío 2016). Even though studying the historical links and exchanges between the metropolises and ‘their’ overseas territories helped supply a better understanding of these relations, at the same time, this perspective could foster an approach that considers colonial empires as coherent and self-sufficient units. Some scholars considered colonial relations through a trans-imperial approach including other spaces in their analyses, in this way challenging the national-imperial category (Hart 2003; Burbank-Cooper 2011; McClintock 2013). Following this perspective, our main interest lies in assessing the place of foreign colonial spaces in the geographical imaginary of other metropolises. In particular, this paper aims to propose a historical panoramic view of the role of Tunisia, before and, overall, after French occupation, in Italian

colonial imaginary through a geographical focus. This paper defines the imaginary as a shared mindset of a group of people (in this case: geographers, politicians, intellectuals), a collective cultural system that performs specific narrations and underlies the perceptions and the choices of the group. Studies on national imaginary (Anderson 1983; Bhabha 1990; Banti 2000) and, more specifically, those on Italian colonial imaginary (Finaldi 2009; Schiavulli 2009; Proglia 2016) demonstrated the role of the ruling class in the production and spread of colonialist narration. Accordingly, this contribution analyzes the writings of politicians, geographers and intellectuals that played an influential role in the making and spreading of a particular geographical representation of Tunisian territory. There are two main reasons, intertwined, that according to the author make the Tunisian case noteworthy in the Italian colonial studies. First of all, by analyzing a minor and unsuccessful part of Italian colonialism, we can assess how colonial failure and imperialist regret shaped the following colonial ventures. For instance, the case of Tunisia, occupied by France in 1881, paved the way for an Italian interest in Libya (Larfaoui 2010). Secondly, the Tunisian case is an outstanding link between migrations, colonialism, and geographical representations for imperial purposes. The latter is the main object of this article. Among its geopolitical interests since the foundation of the Italian kingdom, Tunisia played a major role in Italian colonial imagination due also to the massive migration of Italian nationals to the Tunis Regency under French protection. Rainero and Bessis analyzed, in their pioneer studies in Italy-Tunisia relations during the 1920s and the 1930s (Rainero 1978; Bessis 1981), the political aspects of geographical considerations that claimed a special bond between Italy and Tunisia. A specific analysis of the evolution of geographical assessments concerning Italy-Tunisia relations during the Italian liberal period has been neglected until now. Most of the studies about Italians in late modern Tunisia deal more with their social and political aspects in local society (Pendola 2007; Choate 2010; El Houssi 2012; Faranda 2016) overlooking how geography was a tool to build and to legitimate Italian ambitions. Geographical proximity of the Sicilian and Sardinian islands to the Tunisian shore was interpreted as proof of the legitimacy of Italian claims, as well as human mobilities from Italy to North Africa. This paper considers how migration from Italy developed the particular role Tunisia had in Italian imperial imaginary by claiming the irredentist status on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea from Tunisia to Libya.

A “shred of our Italy” in the African continent

To understand the role of Tunisia in Italian colonial imagination, we must analyze the attempts to include the Tunisian region in the Italian space from a diachronic perspective. Geographical proximity and colonialist fantasies had long paved the way for Italian claims on the Regency. These claims stated that Tunisian territory belonged to Italy. This irredentist idea has a long history which begins in the aftermath of the political unification of Italy.¹ In

1864, a member of the moderate left, Mauro Macchi (Conti 2006), introduced his speech at the Chamber by declaring that: “Tunisia can be really considered as a reflection, an extension, or another shred of our Italy” (Atti del Parlamento Italiano 1888, 4272).² His speech concerned the danger for Italians living in the Regency due to the Tunisian uprising of 1864 – the Majba Revolt (Slama 1967; Anderson 2014, 85) – and he asked for the details of the naval expedition that was sent jointly with France and England to protect their interests in the country. In addition, Macchi asked the Minister if there was a political plan behind this intervention: “I would like to know from him if the assignment given to our representatives is limited to a defense of that numerous and worthy colony, or if he has also given them the right to take part in political affairs, if this were required by the further development of the events” (Atti del Parlamento Italiano 1888, 4272). Only three years after the proclamation of the Italian kingdom, with Rome still under temporary power of the Church, the idea of taking part in internal political affairs of that “shred of our Italy” in the African shore was already present. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Visconti Venosta, reassured Macchi telling him that a naval expedition was sent to protect national interests adding that “I don’t need to explain to the Chamber the reasons why no important event in the Tunis Regency can remain unrelated to the interests of Italian politics” (Atti del Parlamento Italiano 1888, 4286). Some years after, in 1868, Macchi praised the treaty that Visconti Venosta stipulated with the Beylik of Tunis, defining it

a treaty that will make the ties that, by nature, already run between our homeland and Tunisia, closer and stronger; ties that are envied by other people, who would like to exercise a predominant influence in that country, and thus achieve a long-desired aim, for which they would like the Mediterranean to become a lake that is *not ours* (Archivio Storico della Camera dei Deputati 1868).

The international treaty between Tunisia and Italy had, according to this deputy, a natural basis that formed a special bond between the two countries. Geographical nature, like the closeness of Tunisian and Italian shores, acquired, in the words of this deputy, political value. Nevertheless, this hierarchical relation revealed the struggle of European influences over the country and the aim of making the Mediterranean Sea a ‘national’ lake ruled by one power, in this case, Italy. Later, Macchi specified the nature of the ties he assessed in 1868. A few years later, in 1871, he returned to the concept of Tunisia as a ‘shred of our Italy’, specifying of which shred of Italy Tunisia was an extension: “Italy has an interest in keeping good economic and commercial relations with Tunisia, which, in a word, can be considered as an appendix of Sardinia” (Atti del Parlamento Italiano 1871, 610). In his imperialist perspective, the Tunisian region, part of the African continent, was an appendix of the island of Sardinia. If the deputy Macchi considered Tunisia ‘like’ an Italian fragment and in particular of Sardinia, Attilio Brunialti – geographer and politician – claimed in 1876 that there was an Italian geological origin of Tunisian territory: “Tunisia, a piece of Italy detached and thrown away by the

force of some volcanic upheaval at the gates of the desert” (Brunialti 1876, v). Brunialti became committed to Italian colonial policy: as publicist and founder of *Giornale delle Colonie*, he collaborated with other geography journals, such as the *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* (D’Amelio 1972). For Brunialti, the Italian geological origin of Tunisia was a conviction that he maintained in his following writings. In 1881, the year of the French occupation of Tunisia – the ‘slap of Tunis’ for Italy – Brunialti published a book in which he asserted that: “the chain of Italian volcanoes extends into the interior of Africa, irrefutable testimony to ancient telluric affinities” (Brunialti 1881, 101). He did not support these pseudo-geographical considerations by chance, but to legitimize a project of Italian domination over the Maghreb country: “nature and history would, therefore, have given Tunis in the first place, among all the powers, to Italy. This country is much closer to us than others, almost an extension, certainly it was united to ours in prehistoric times” (Brunialti 1881,133). Such an idea is made clear from a geopolitical perspective when he asserts that Tunisia “is the land of Africa closest to Sicily, geographically almost Italy, economically its appendix, militarily a threat or a shelter” (Brunialti 1881,133). Brunialti’s thesis supported a geographical justification of Italian colonial ambitions over Tunisia. The nature of Tunisian territory is interpreted as proof of its legitimate ‘belonging’ to Italy. The imperialist ambition over Tunisia had its place in the colonialist narration. It is important to underline here that Italian governments did not have a military plan to conquer Tunisia before 1881 (and until the fascist period). The Italian strategy, considering its political and military weakness, of an equilibrium of power in the Mediterranean with France and England aimed at formal independence of the Regency in which Italy could have played a prominent role thanks to its industries, interests and settlers (Lewis 2013). So, the ‘loss’ of Tunisia was more a poisoning fruit of Italian colonial narration – the regret of imperialist dreams – than a real defeat.

From Trento to Tunis: expanding the borders of the imagined nation

After the French invasion and the installation of a protectorate over the Regency, a considerable flux of migrants fled from Italy to Tunisia (Fauri 2015). In 1906, the Italian Vice-Consul in Tunis, Tommaso Carletti, affirmed that “for reasons of proximity, climate, customs, Sicilians, Sardinians and Southerners are more at home in Tunisia than the Italians of the Center and North” (Commissariato Generale dell’Emigrazione 1906, 334). Several French colonialist publicists saw in the Tunisian-Italian climatic similarity one of the reasons for the success of immigration to the country. ‘Natural’ adaptation factors are once again mobilized to explain, or legitimize, the relations between Italy and Tunisia, both in regards to the colonial project and the migratory movement. Tunisia, because of its proximity, its climate, and its immigrants, had a special place in the Italian imagination: an almost-colony or a lost colony. Proof of this, according to the nationalist perspective, was the Italian workers’ presence in the country. Tunisia, protected by French rule and populated by Italian workers, became the

link between the emigration of Italians and the colonialist ambitions of the Italian kingdom. An important turning point in this Italian-African irredentism occurred during 1911 when nationalist discourse claimed an Italianness of Tunisia more through human settlements than geological factors. This idea is the continuation and the development of the speeches about the Italianness of Tunisia which date back to the day after Italian unification to Macchi and Brunialti. Gualtiero Castellini, nationalist publicist (Ficini 2008), nephew of the sociologist and criminologist Scipio Sighele, wrote in 1911 – before the start of the Italian colonialist enterprise in Tripolitania – these considerations on Tunisia and its relationship with Italy:

in Tunisia, populated by 150,000 of her sons, Italy must accomplish a work of culture today. Not a political work, but a national one. It must transform a slavish colony, a colony that might stumble like Argentina, into an irreconcilable land. We have to slowly get used to considering this land in fact Italian land, and to call it quite simply, like the northern lands, Italian land subjected to France. When we will have surrounded the country with ideally unredeemed regions, from Brenner to Carthage, then we can also think of the necessary vindications [...] Whoever wants to predict the future could say that perhaps Tripoli will be our African Trento; Tunis our Trieste. The first could be Italian with Italy; the second is perhaps condemned, as Trieste is condemned, to be Italian outside Italy [...] Irredent Tunis teaches us, like Trieste, that Italy was half-made (Castellini 1911, 152-153).

Castellini departs from the strictly colonial framework by interweaving it with the irredentist narration. As Italy had ‘unredeemed’ national lands, it also had ‘unredeemed colonies’ such as Tunisia and Tripolitania. Castellini advocated for an expansion of the Italian national imagination, seen as a first step in the imperialist political process. Before military expansion, it is necessary to conquer the national imagination and to expand the imagined borders of the nation-empire. It is worth noting that this work was published before the invasion of Libya. The expression ‘considering this land in fact Italian land’ highlights the ideological work that must be done to expand the spatial boundaries of the national imagination. Such enlargement includes the Tunisian-Libyan space which is called upon to play the role of a ‘colonial’ counterpart to the question of Trento and Trieste.

The main reason that pushed Castellini to affirm this Italian Africanist irredentism in Tunisia was the quantity of Italians settled there (88 thousands in 1911), more so than the geology of the territory. The voluntary and spontaneous emigration of the Italians had formed an ‘unredeemed’ Italian land on the southern coast of the Mediterranean. Castellini is not the only one who used the Tunisian case to encourage a colonialist enterprise in Tripolitania. The journalist of the newspaper *La Tribuna*, Giuseppe Piazza, made a trip to Tripolitania in March-May 1911 (some months before the outbreak of the war). His report, published in the Roman national newspaper, is collected in a book entitled *Our Promised Land – Letter from Tripolitania* (Piazza 1911) which reveals from its title the intention of the author who incites public opinion and the Italian government to occupy the Libyan region (Schiavulli 2009). If the focus of the report is Tripolitania, ‘the Promised Land’ of Italian colonialism, the passage of his journey through Tunisia is essential more rhetorical than geographical. Piazza devotes

the introductory chapter to the passage in Tunisia with the very eloquent title *Through the Lost Land*. Describing French policies as limiting the activities of Italians and as convincing them to voluntarily apply for French nationality, the Sicilian journalist asserts, projecting the near future of Italian settlement in the region, that: “And so, from this lost land, the last rampart of Italianness will be disappeared, erased forever [...] recriminations are useless. It is better to live, repair, compensate. There is yet another ‘Promised Land’” (Piazza 1911, 29). The ‘lost colony’, on the one hand, remains a kind of ‘colonial shock’ which is reactivated during Italian colonial enterprises; on the other, it justifies, in the colonial imagination – thanks to immigration – Italian ambitions for new overseas expansion. Enrico Corradini, founder and leader of the Italian Nationalist Association, was of the same idea when he insisted on the imperialist function that emigration must have for Imperial Italy. Corradini published in 1912, after the outbreak of the Italo-Turkish War, his work dedicated to General Giovanni Ameglio – one of the military protagonists of the war – entitled *On the Ways of the New empire: From the Emigration of Tunis to the War in the Aegean*. The colonialist enterprise in Tripolitania and Rhodes did not make the Italian colonial imagination forget about Tunisia. In the preface to the work, we read:

The ‘ways’ of our new empire are in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, while here we are talking about Tunisia, Italian emigration to Tunisia and the Aegean islands that we occupied rather than conquered [...] emigration is in a way a principle of imperialism, because, at least, the people who emigrate can become raw material of imperialism. Otherwise, we would not understand why I speak of Tunis with this title, of Tunis which, rather, was a province taken from the new Italian empire (Corradini 1912, IX).

Corradini knew the Tunisian context quite well thanks to his travel to Tunis and Sfax in 1910, invited by the local committee of the Dante Alighieri Society to give political speeches in private meetings (Archivio Storico della Società Dante Alighieri 1910). The local upper-class mostly supported nationalist ideas taking part in the Italian colonialist imaginary through newspapers and writings, and in 1911 supported the Italian invasion of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. The ‘Lost Colony’ was not only a narrative figure in the colonialist imaginary but also a concrete political laboratory of Italian imperialism beyond its borders.

Conclusions

Tunisia in its role of a ‘Lost Colony’ or according to Corradini, of a ‘taken province’ (but, for it to be ‘lost’, when was it first ‘taken’ by Italy?), produced important outcomes in Italian colonial imagination. The presence of settled Italian migrants qualified Tunisia as ‘irredent’ land according to Castellini (1911), or as a ‘province’ of the Italian empire (Corradini 1912) which included migrant settlements too (Aqarone 1989). According to this view, migration must become a vanguard of the expansion of Italy overseas. In another writing, the leader of the Italian nationalist party asserted the need for Italian colonialism to harness the energy and

will of Italian migrants. Emigration is interpreted as proof of the potentially imperialist attitude of the Italian people:

the Sicilians in French Africa, like the Italians in the rest of the world, are dispersed, each abandoned to their fate; but if, one day, Italian blindness can be enlightened, and if what is today dispersed can become a united force, then here is the race of people who truly want to be colonizers (Corradini 1911, 117).

Corradini explicitly referred to the concept of ‘race’ to define those who are (or should be) responsible for colonizing overseas spaces. Colonialism played an important role in representing Italians as a ‘people’ and as a ‘race’ (Re 2010; Giuliani and Lombardi Diop 2013). This analysis demonstrated that a particular geographical imagination influenced colonial aims. In addition, it showed how foreign colonial spaces played a significant role in Italian colonialism. Labour migrations from Southern Italy, Sicily, and Sardinian to Tunisia were included in the colonialist imaginary as a tool of imperialist power. This inclusion developed the imperialist idea of Tunisia geographically (and so ‘naturally’) tied to Italy in an ‘irredentist’ claim to push the border of the imagined nation further south. Historiography has proved the prominent link between colonial ventures and nation-building, focusing mainly on the actual national colonial space. This contribution aimed to shed some light on how foreign colonial spaces could be implied in the colonialist imaginary of a nation as well, because “it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings” (Said 1993, 7). Thanks to considering colonial spaces beyond the national-imperial unit, we can understand the deep connections and exchanges that formed not only our contemporary international relations but also our geographical perspectives.

Notes

¹ Other irredentist claims concerned Corsica, Malta (Paci 2015) and the Balkan area (Rodogno 2003), especially during fascism.

² All citations of sources in Italian that appear in the article were translated by author.

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