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Empires ancient and modern: strength, modernity and power in imperial ideology from the Liberal period to Fascism

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This article examines the image of Empire developed in public discourse in Italy during the late Liberal period and Fascism by placing it in the context of representations of the British Empire, with which Italian imperial ambitions were compared. There is a continuity in seeing the British Empire as the expression of industrial and commercial modernity and its resultant strength, but what in the Liberal period was seen as an unparalleled superiority became under Fascism a supremacy acquired in a particular period but now exhibiting signs of decline, which Fascism should contest and surpass. Admiration of the British was mixed with disparagement: key figures expressed a competitive resentment towards Britain and its dominant international position, seeing it as the epitome of 'modern' imperial power against which Fascism was destined to be measured. In the 1930s signs of the British Empire's decline were sought, developing the idea in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that British domination would also rise and fall, and announcing the replacement of the 'British order', founded on commercial modernity and the strength of money and capital, by Fascism's new civilisation, with its authentic heritage of imperial *romanità*. This competitiveness towards Britain, which historiography has principally seen as a component of foreign policy (as was clear over Ethiopia), has additional significance when seen as an element of political culture that relates to the concept of the State. The autonomy and strength of the State were an important feature of Fascism's self-representation and of its legal culture, and in this light the possession of an empire came to be seen as an essential aspect of statehood and power.

Keywords: Fascism; Liberal Italy; modernity; Empire; State; journalism; strength; power

To Dino Grandi, as he took on the role of Italian ambassador in London in 1929, the then Secretary General of the League of Nations and future ambassador in Rome, Eric Drummond, seemed '[t]all, thin and utterly British. He doesn't appreciate beautiful things. He stayed in Madrid for a fortnight without going to the Prado, but let no day pass without having his round of golf.' Drummond was a product of the legendary educational model reserved for the upper classes, described in Grandi's private diary:

Eton. The school desks are made of wood from the timbers of Spanish ships taken in the battle where Queen Elizabeth defeated and destroyed Philip II's great Spanish Armada. When these sons of lords, viscounts and dukes do something 'unfair' their shirts are removed and they are soundly thrashed by their teacher with a cane, surrounded by their fellow pupils who watch keenly for any tears. These

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British do not teach much Latin, Mathematics or Greek, it is true; but they teach how to be *men*, to have *character*, and to achieve that *arrogance*, which is the secret of their greatness. (Nello 2003, 141; emphasis original)

It is revealing that after Mussolini's former Minister for Foreign Affairs had restated the stereotypes then current in Europe and Italy regarding the British national character, he reflected thoughtfully on the shortcomings of his own compatriots' behaviour:

[w]e Italians are not arrogant enough. It is one thing to be noisy and boastful, and another to be quietly arrogant. If we could learn some of the virtues of these Romans of Britain, we would be the world's leading people. (Nello 2003, 141)

Grandi's identification of the contemporary British with the ancient Romans, made within the confines of his diary and never expressed in any writing for public circulation, was at the root of a problematic admiration that even one of the first Fascists like Grandi could not hide, at least from himself. This intensified the antagonism between the Mediterranean aspirations of the Fascist regime, which projected the myth of *romanità* onto itself with increasing readiness and conviction, and the people that by their deeds, and with their dominating qualities, had for almost two centuries been the embodiment of the idea of empire. Admiration and detraction were thus inextricably mixed together. As Grandi observed in his diary in January 1929, the British as a whole were 'cold, uncultured and very great, like the Romans' (Nello 2003, 141). Giuseppe Bottai, in his diary for January 1943, wrote that the extraordinary resilience of the British population under German bombardment should be ascribed to their 'stupidity':

[w]e can see that the British people are tough and resolute; they have coped well with the German bombing, in which they have lost one and a half million houses. The British rely on one strength, their stupidity. This is not just a figure of speech but the actual nature of the British intellect, which is slower and duller. (Bottai 1989, 350)

In this article I will be highlighting how interwoven admiration and criticism for the British people, many indications of which can be seen in statements by proponents of the Fascist regime, were not just the expression of a complex but well-known competitive approach to Great Britain and its position of supremacy in international relationships (Bosworth 1998, 2005, 367–395). They also reflected the belief that having an imperial dimension was an essential attribute of power with a 'modern' basis, as the British Empire had been demonstrating for at least two centuries (Edwards 1999; Bell 2007). As a result, as we will see presently, in a transposition of the perspective of Edward Gibbon, the horizon was anxiously scanned for any signs of the decline that would necessarily follow the high point of the greatness Britain had already achieved. At the turn of the eighteenth century Gibbon (1776–89), in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, had seen the arc travelled by the Empire of the Caesars as a metaphor for future British rule, then in the ascendant;¹ while in the Edwardian period references to the models of the classical age as antecedents of the British Empire were widespread,² in Italy in the 1930s and early 1940s Fascist leaflets and studies announced the 'nemesis of history', which was to send British domination 'to the archaeological museum of dead civilisations' ('La crisi dell'Impero Britannico' 1941, 46).³

The inevitable conflict

The extent to which the very existence of the British Empire depended on British ideology, culture, politics, education and society as a whole, across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is still the subject of debate between historians. It lies within the context of an

increased interest in imperial and global history that continues to generate wider and comparative studies;⁴ this has also had its reverberations within Italian historiography (see Romanelli 2010; Abbattista 2010). Consideration of the issue of the impact of the Empire on British society, notwithstanding some continued discussion, has by and large moved on from a phase of highlighting the pervasiveness of imperial ideology in culture, politics and education, just as the ‘orientalist’ approach, which showed the function served in British culture by seeing colonial subjects as ‘other’, has lost its intensity.⁵ The focus is now on a more developed analysis of the range of attitudes the population had towards the Empire, and of the variety of experiences that resulted from it. From the image of the Empire as mirroring the differences and internal structure of British society (Cannadine 2001), to the careful assessment of the real degree of impact that imperial factors had within British society, and how much these interacted with other factors (Porter 2004), the best studies show how the existence of the Empire loosened and complicated the boundaries of a hierarchical society. This responded to the stimulus of imperialism in ways that were often controversial and subject to debate, rather than in a monolithic manner.⁶

For Italian Fascists, however, whether sympathetic or not, the identification between Britishness and the British Empire was common currency. As Bernard Porter says of foreign observers in general, ‘[f]or them, Britain was *defined* by her empire, and by the power, arrogance, and sometimes atrocious behaviour they associated with it. This was because the face Britain usually presented to them, as foreigners, was the imperial one’ (2004, 306; emphasis original). It was not necessary to be friendly with Great Britain and its empire to be attracted to it, as is seen in Buruma’s amusing portrayal of Kaiser Wilhelm II, ‘[t]he Anglomane who hated England’ (1998, 199–222), who proudly wore the uniform of a British navy admiral, read Kipling and P.G. Wodehouse, and unconditionally admired his grandmother, Queen Victoria. Convinced, however, by Houston S. Chamberlain’s view of the state of advanced Judaisation and cosmopolitan degeneration of the British Isles, he proposed to save Great Britain from itself, charging Admiral von Tirpitz, a ‘peculiarly resentful Anglophile’ (Buruma 1998, 213), with construction of a powerful fleet, modelled on the Royal Navy, that would compete with the British Empire and take its place.

Competitive resentment also enlivened many of Fascism’s leaders and publicists. It is not surprising that Roberto Forges Davanzati, during the months of preparation for the assault on Ethiopia, emphasised the imperial interests which determined British hostility towards Fascism’s African plans, a hostility heightened by the action of the League of Nations. As he never tired of explaining in *Cronache del regime*, his daily evening radio programme broadcast by Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche (EIAR), the Italy–Abyssinia dispute was simply a colonial clash between the great nation of Italy, now back in the European forefront thanks to Fascism, and a feudal slave-driving kingdom, Ethiopia, which should not be allowed the status of ‘nation’. It was a conflict that ought to be resolved on African soil and contained there, without repercussions in the European context:

The dangers of this clash for Europe and the world lie exclusively in the attempted presentation of it in spurious League of Nations terms. This has been the particular and very unfortunate political endeavour of the British Conservative government, which has shown itself to be clearly only acting in its own authentically imperialist interests, but thought it could conceal these behind a mask of League disinterestedness and zeal. There are two reasons for this: to present itself in Europe and the world as an advocate for universal peace; and to give itself an advantage, on the eve of elections, in relation to the Labour opposition which exploits the myth of the League of Nations, especially now that Bolshevik Russia has arrived in Geneva. (Forges Davanzati 1937, 113)

It is even less surprising that this anti-British approach was revived during the Second World War: from ‘God curse the English’, the graphic daily refrain of Mario Appellius, another radio journalist,⁷ to the more subtle observations of Virginio Gayda, one of the publicists closest to the Fascist government, and accredited as the official spokesperson for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. In 1941 Gayda, at the end of a lengthy treatise summarising British–Italian relations from the Risorgimento to the present, attempted to present the Italy–Germany Axis as architect of the ‘construction of a new order in Europe with separate but co-ordinated tasks, in united communities, for the great ruling nations’:

The new European order is the direct antithesis of the old order conceived and pursued by Britain during the centuries of its domination. British policy, up to the war against Germany and Italy, aimed at the destruction, not construction, of European unity. It only kept its eye on the continent and European waters in order to look out for anything that would serve its immediate political supremacy and its military power. Its only concerns were to separate the European peoples, meddle with and oppose their interests, subjugate the weaker countries, and damage, as much as possible, the stronger and more independent ones, those most capable of attracting and organising the other nations. (Gayda 1941, 549)

On this basis, Gayda set out to justify the inevitability of Anglo-Italian hostility. There was the theme of Anglo-Judaism as the reason for corruption of Anglo-Saxon plutocratic modernity, for which Gayda, like Interlandi as we will see below, was one of the earliest and most ardent exponents: ‘[r]acial politics arrived late in Italy. In Britain and the United States, however, Judaism made very early moves against Fascist Italy, whose economic and social system did not appear advantageous to the interests of its internationalist banking’ (Gayda 1941, 297).⁸ Apart from this, the British were above all criticised for having an empire and for wanting to preserve and enlarge this, opportunistically balancing international alliances and enmities to this end.

For the diplomatic commentator of the *Giornale d’Italia*, the calculating nature of British friendship for Italy during the Risorgimento and immediately after unification was especially reprehensible. In his expansive account Gayda insistently restated the anti-French motivation of British support for the nationalist case in pre-unification Italy, and lamented this:

Britain wanted to prevent France spreading its influence and domination over Italy. It even wanted Italy, on its own or in alliance with other countries, to be a permanent force of opposition towards France. Given these twin aims, both negative and positive, all the varying British positions in regard to Italian problems and movements derived from an assessment of their potential usefulness against the French. The Italian cause was almost never considered in London on its own merits, for its vibrant humanity, or for its other historical values and ideals. (1941, 66)

This complaint was emphasised further:

Britain has thus had no genuine friendship for Italy and its cause. [...] [I]n English policy genuine friendships never exist. There are subordinated client networks or mutual interests of varying duration. In Britain, the nation proclaimed to be a friend is one that more or less willingly, rightly or wrongly, serves British interests by denying its own independent interests. (70)

The apparent naivety of this accusation might seem odd coming from a writer like Gayda, an adviser to Galeazzo Ciano and an experienced observer of international politics who had witnessed the Great War and the post-war crisis in person.⁹ An explanation emerges with the main subject addressed soon after: the inevitability of competition in the Mediterranean, where the new Italy was ‘imprisoned’ by the British navy. The justification for Italy’s African aspirations was made with reference to the old concept of the Mediterranean as an ‘inner sea’, safe passage across which was essential for it to have freedom of action:

Italy seeks freedom and control in the Mediterranean above all to ensure the defence of its territory, the independence of its national and economic life, and connectedness for its various populations, which are distributed across the peninsula, the islands and the more distant lands of Africa. Italy seeks freedom on the inner sea in order to achieve [...] unfettered contact with the civilised peoples of the world, and with the earth's primary resources that are needed for the work of its great productive culture. [...] Because of this, the war against Britain is one of the most serious and defining moments in Italy's entire national history after the end of the Roman Empire. [...] It is the natural continuation and essential epilogue to the wars of the Risorgimento. [...] The Italian nation cannot live freely on its territory if it is not free to move and provide for itself on the sea that surrounds it, if it cannot freely leave this closed sea, whose gates are controlled by Britain, and if it does not make the independence of both its foreign policy and its economy secure from competing international causes, and from contingent or permanent foreign controls. (Gayda 1941, 545–546)

The idea of the 'spiritual' nature of a continuing Risorgimento also faithfully reiterated the post-Mazzinian stylistic feature of the universalist ambitions of Italian nationalism, which as Emilio Gentile shows 'had ambitions to take its place on a level of epoch-making superiority compared to other kinds of European nationalism, presenting itself both as a national and universal revolution' (2009, 173). Fascist Italy, as the Fascist scholar Carlo Curcio declared, transcended the self-interest of individual nations to establish itself as a superior entity, 'as the central part of a system, as an element of an organization that is above all spiritual and therefore civilized' (Gentile 2009, 174).

In Gayda's argument, however, the insistent criticism of British ruthlessness, repeated often, cut across his promotion of the model of spiritual and universalist imperialism. He recalled that it had been Britain, in competition with France for control of Egypt after the opening of the Suez Canal, which 'invited' Italy into the Horn of Africa, while at the same time letting France occupy Tunisia in 1881, to keep it away from the Red Sea. It did this without ever committing itself to bilateral agreements:

Italy has always been the poor relation, called on if needed but forgotten if nothing can be asked of her. (Gayda 1941, 96)

Italy asked for stronger guarantees and more detailed commitments to its defence and the resolution of its interests. Britain refused; it wished to remain the arbiter of problems and events, and free to make its own decisions. (101)

Italy, however, continued to trust in British policy with a faithfulness that on more than one occasion appeared almost servile. (108)

When in 1884 the British Foreign Office encouraged Italy to occupy Massawa, it was not:

the understanding of real needs and the recognition of Italian rights, in the competition for colonies between the great powers, which motivated it, but simply the quest for an ally who might share the burden and risks of the struggle against French expansion. (115)

Where British policy is concerned, Italy ought not to be an independent protagonist in colonial history, but just a second-rank partner in British plans. (117)

As a junior partner, Italy might find itself redundant as alliances changed: 'The limited and episodic British defence of Italian interests has only ever served its struggle with France' (121). After the Fashoda Incident, the rapprochement between Britain and France 'betrayed' earlier commitments to Italy: 'Now that its relationship with France had been determined by the agreement of 1899, Britain no longer had any immediate interest in friendship with Italy in the colonial struggle' (106). This was not to mention the purposes served by inviting Italy to join the Entente, the broken promises of the London Pact, the dispersal of the colonies of Wilhelm II's defeated empire without considering Italy, and so on. In the insistent repetition of resentment towards British 'coldness', 'impassiveness' and 'indifference' when faced with Italy's essential

needs, in addition to the obvious symptoms of feelings of inferiority, another motive should be understood. We are aided here by a specific historical comparison, made at the end of the treatise:

The war between Rome and Carthage seems to anticipate, far back in history, the war between Italy and Great Britain. [...] Carthage weighed down on Rome with its great fleet, threatening the Mediterranean and the Italian peninsula, its constructive politics, its trading, and its need for expansion. (446–447)¹⁰

Gayda was writing in 1941. With the role of the Carthaginians given to the British, and Rome's legacy to Fascism, he stressed the contrast between the imperial aspirations of the Latin city and those of the Phoenician colony. The difference lay in the diverse nature of their push for expansion, one being the expression of 'a peasant and warrior people, anxious for order and work', while the other reflected 'a trading, speculating, commercial and aggressive people'. Above all, they were differentiated by contrasting ideas about supremacy, which for Gayda also had to have an overall strategic purpose. There was an obvious allusion to the Mediterranean objectives of Mussolini's 'parallel war' alongside Italy's German ally: 'Rome, fighting Carthage, was not only thinking about its defence and its power. The aim was in fact to create unity and harmony among the Mediterranean peoples' (446).

Antagonism towards the British, whose empire had for decades embodied the historical legacy of Roman dominating strength, has much clearer significance when seen from this neo-Gibbonian perspective. Among the reasons for the anti-British polemic was the reclamation of the legacy of 'that Rome where Christ is a Roman', in Dante's well-known verse, which had seen the birth of 'the powerful entity of the Christian church, which also inherited in part the concept of imperial power and one day had to subject sovereigns and peoples to its moral authority' (Pais 1929/30, 30).

Empire, strength and modernity

Competitive ill-feeling towards the British Empire, expressed in the reversal of Gibbon's metaphor outlined by Gayda, held within it a reference to what was, despite everything, the epitome of modern imperial power, by which Fascism had to measure itself. Although according to the Fascist perspective it was now in evident decline, the incarnation of imperial power in modern times had been the British Empire, and with this there had to be a reckoning. Moreover, the comparison of the British with the Carthaginians indicated the negative meaning ascribed to the 'modernity' of the British Empire: this was a commercial modernity, expressing the strength of money and capital, and in decline, as it was the antithesis of the new civilisation represented by Fascism, which was rooted in the myth of 'romanità'.

Before Fascism, this very same commercial, capitalist and industrial modernity had been a matter of great fascination for observers of the British Empire at its peak, due to its representation of the 'natural' expression of economic strength. This had marked a significant shift in perspective from the essentially liberal political importance that it was given by nineteenth-century anglophiles (Cerasi 2002; Biagini 2004).

Perhaps it is not surprising that in the Liberal period its most enthusiastic admirers included Giuseppe Beviere, a nationalist, expansionist and imperialist who became well known over his impassioned support for the Libyan war (Beviere 1912). The year before the Italo-Turkish conflict, as London correspondent for *La Stampa*, he published in book form his observations on 'the people who could produce the Bible and who had to conquer the world' (Beviere 1910, 9),

starting with an ecstatic reflection on the metropolitan vastness of London, ‘the city of the world that elicits the most compelling admiration, giving the visitor an unforgettable memory’ (5):

Why? What creates the extraordinarily powerful fascination of London, the indescribable emanation of sublimeness that seizes you the moment you tumble out of Charing Cross station into the oceanic maelstrom of the Strand, staying with you forever, even when the rivers of time and distance have carried you far away from the metropolis? (5)

Leaving aside futuristic explanations – ‘London is a city of energy, this is the answer’ (5) – the root cause for the dazzling modernity of the British capital, an expression of the consequences of its imperial primacy, was seen to lie in the nation’s native individualism:

Britain is strong, because it believes in and counts on individual energies alone. [...] With these ideas spread right across the island, a society of ‘the right men in the right places’ took shape: that is to say, a nation of strong individuals which also demands respect when they express themselves in collective endeavour. (392–393)

In fact: ‘It is into Britain’s moral rather than geological substratum, and into its soul rather than its coal, that the roots of its imperial greatness were driven by destiny’ (9). In linking together imperialism, individualism and modernity, Bevione was drawing on an established model. This had been introduced by the success of Guglielmo Ferrero’s *Europa giovane* (1897) and located Anglo-Saxon societies at the forefront of the development of civilization, due to the non-community nature of their main social ties. Olindo Malagodi’s contribution was to highlight imperialism’s interdependence with deployment of the power of industrialism, in another book compiled in London, while he was correspondent for the Giolittian *La Tribuna*. The ‘culture of work’ was the foundation of contemporary life:

Production is the most important organ of society, being the heart that pumps the life-giving surge of blood right through the organism: every change in this necessarily has repercussions for all its parts. The technical revolution has thus been at the root of a great social and moral revolution. (Malagodi 1901, 11)

Its most spectacular manifestation had been imperial expansion, an inevitable product of its historical development:

Imperialism is not justified except when and where the conditions exist that give it a purpose; when it creates, rather than just destroying; when it contributes something, rather than just taking away from the peoples where it is imposed; when it sows the seeds of a higher existence among the inevitable ruins left in its wake. The only genuine and necessary imperialism of our times is therefore that which comes from industrial civilization. (Malagodi 1901, 295)

Malagodi had been present at the culmination of this, the majestic Victorian Jubilee of 1897.

As the first decade of the twentieth century ended, however, it no longer seemed possible to consider the British Empire’s gains without also noting various indications of a weakening in its previously unquestioned primacy. Bevione was regretfully nostalgic: ‘[t]his Britain has been great, and should never die; because it has given the world so many precious gifts, even a momentary consideration of its twilight makes one shudder’ (1910, 462). However, he listed the most obvious signs: German and American competition threatened the profits of British trade and industry; Fabian and trade union socialism had made great strides; protectionism seemed inevitable:

The factors that have paved the way for the arrival of socialism in Britain are the same ones that, on other fronts, will bring to this foggy island from the continent the taxation regime that was Joe Chamberlain’s final advice to his country; they are the same factors that have started to break away the jewels in the heavy crown of British industrial and commercial hegemony. (Bevione 1910, 362)

The reasons lay in the waning of the individualism that had sustained the strong development of the Victorian age: '[T]he beginning of decline coincides with a weakening of individualist instincts, and with a diversion of national thinking away from the individualist current of previous generations' (393). This exposed the British Empire to the growing German threat, which was now not only commercial but also military: 'Why does it not swoop down on Germany on the high seas, destroy its future army while this is still in embryo, capture its merchant navy, and damage beyond repair its claims to domination?' (407).¹¹

Malagodi, by contrast, had seen in the emergence of militarism 'a serious symptom of the degeneration of modern imperialism':

What are the relationships between that progressive and peace-loving civilization that we believed and hoped should conquer the world, just with the strength of its organic superiority, and these new imperialist ambitions and recent episodes of militarism that appear to contradict that hope and trust? (1901, 5)

Militarism and industrialism, he believed, were two antithetical terms, and British imperialism, generated by its industrial leadership, was at risk of mutating should it give in to the call for armed force:

The old peace-loving Britain, as I have observed, built its empire without seeking to do so and almost without realising, driven by its own organic energy; but this creative energy has in fact for several years been weakened, or has come up against the new energy of other peoples. (29)

These included:

those small new peoples who show that they have great qualities, like the Boers, who have done such magnificent work as agricultural pioneers on the vast high plains of southern Africa, in that difficult and cursed terrain where all previous attempts at colonisation, by nations who have boasted of being in the forefront regarding power and wealth, have failed. (401)¹²

It was the Second Boer War, then under way, that was the indicator of this mutation:

The war in the Transvaal has shown Britain undergoing a profound transformation. This conflict has gone against all those high ideals of international justice that Britain had advocated since the start of the century, and that had made it so popular among other nations; it has gone against many of those new formulas for imperial expansion that it had discovered and been the first to apply, and to which British imperialism owed its good fortune among the pitiful failures of its rivals; but worse still, it has revealed an extraordinary metamorphosis of the country's spirit. [. . .] In this visage can be seen the strain and violent tension of a proud will, together with the bitter unease of a secret sense of weakness. (27, 29)

The exercise of force, so evident in the Boer Wars, thus paradoxically heralded the beginning of the decline of the world's richest and most civilised nation, whose rule was no longer asserted with 'absent-minded' ease, but had to be harshly imposed. In this, Malagodi echoed arguments that were circulating widely in European political and cultural discussions of the time.¹³ By employing armed force rather than the supremacy of its wealth and civilisation, moreover against the Boers, a white population of European origin, Britain was putting itself on the same level as the other powers engaged in imperialist competition. The brutality of the military campaign in the Transvaal appeared to reveal how British expansion was fuelled by the most basic instinct for supremacy: '[i]n the Transvaal and Sudan, in India and to some extent anywhere that there is territorial competition', British behaviour seemed driven by 'the thirst for gold and conquests' (Neal 1899). In the *Nuova Antologia*, not usually thought to be anti-British, the Boers were likened to the Greeks at Thermopylae, and their challenge to the world's greatest colonial empire was seen as 'heroic' as it was motivated by

issues of national independence (Nobili Vitelleschi 1899, 351). As another correspondent observed,

when an enormously rich and arrogant nation, able to draw on vast resources, fights for reasons of greed a relatively poor people, small in number and with no external support, victory of the former can never be noble or worthy. (Ouida 1899, 584)

Among the chorus of criticism for British aggression, which had few dissenting voices,¹⁴ there were also some tones of satisfaction over the ‘normalisation’ of British primacy, which until then had been seen as beyond compare. The questioning of this was an important reason for the continuing success of a pamphlet which had explored the causes of ‘Anglo-Saxon superiority’, exciting great interest and quickly reaching its twenty-sixth printing, while being translated into the main European languages (Demolins 1897).¹⁵ Edmonde Demolins, a sociologist in the tradition of Le Play, held that the explanation for Britain’s undisputed superiority lay not in its history and culture, as was argued by Guglielmo Ferrero (1897) at much the same time,¹⁶ but in its educational system. Demolins’ prescription, and the reason for his fame, was optimistic: as they were a product of education, the elements of Anglo-Saxon ‘superiority’ could be reproduced elsewhere. The gap could be closed between community-based societies like the Latin, where the individual tended to rely on the group – the family, or public authority – and particularist societies like the Anglo-Saxon, where the individual tended to be self-reliant. The solution was to reproduce the educational model believed to be best for creating ‘colonising man’: private schools, with much sport and practical activity, and an avoidance of learning by rote. Demolins subsequently dedicated himself to putting this idea into practice.¹⁷ His pamphlet was suffused by clear intentions to compete, and his suggestions were received in Italy in the same vein. Many of the ills afflicting Italian society could be addressed by taking inspiration from ‘education for individualism’:

The British system of education develops men, not employees; it prepares people for the struggle for life; it keeps ‘home’ free from many low vices; it gives the individual high levels of dignity and moral worth; and it makes the whole country impervious to socialism, by which all other peoples feel threatened. (Gargano 1899)

From ideas about encouraging competitive emulation, to consideration of the indications of ‘normalisation’ in relation to the Boer Wars, there was wide agreement with the observation that closed Malagodi’s book. This foreshadowed the beginning of the end for British supremacy across the world:

The great imperial people suddenly wakes from its humble sleep to find itself in the enchanted palace of its glory, wealth and power; but this awakening is fatal. Frugality is then succeeded by excess: the triumphant people lays out for itself a colossal banquet of pleasure, pride, and vanity [...]. As we know, however, even the longest and most splendid days of history have their sunsets; silence and shadow, little by little, will envelop the exultant splendours of those who triumph today. (Malagodi 1901, 406)

Empire, State and power: from Adua to Addis Ababa

While there was thus continuity between the late Liberal age and Fascism in regarding the British Empire as the latest expression of contemporary industrial and commercial modernity, it was a continuity whose values became inverted. What in the Liberal period had represented an unrivalled superiority – individualism, sternness of character and entrepreneurial daring, all of which had supported the expansion of British rule across the world, and had also inspired aspects

of education policy from Italian nationalism to Fascism (Gibelli 2005) – became the mask of a dominance acquired in a particular historical period, now showing signs of decline, which Fascism was obliged to contest and overcome.

In my view this competitive attitude of Fascism towards Great Britain, which is evident in the historiography as an aspect of foreign policy, especially in the 1930s (Bosworth 1996, 2005, 277–306; Mack Smith 1977; Collotti 2000), has particular significance if it is seen as an element of political culture that must be located in relation to the concept of the State, within which the dimensions of power and strength cannot be separated from the image of the Empire.

It is well known that after its re-establishment as a discipline by Orlando in the late nineteenth century, Italian public law focused on defining the attributes of statehood;¹⁸ there has also been further exploration of the crucial role of legal culture in establishing the autonomy and strength of the State as a distinctive element of Fascism's self-representation (Gentile, Lanchester, and Tarquini 2010; Battente 2005; D'Alfonso 2004; Sordi 2005). As has been highlighted recently by detailed research on the ideological elements within the culture of the lawyers engaged in determining colonial law in the 1930s (De Napoli 2009; De Cristofaro 2008), possession of an empire came to be the fundamental attribute of statehood and power.

The 'necessity' of acquiring an imperial dimension appears clear from the conduct of the war in Ethiopia, where an enormous logistical and military endeavour was undertaken. According to Giorgio Rochat (2005), it was the largest colonial war ever fought: an expeditionary force of about 500,000 soldiers (Italians and Askaris), more than 100,000 enlisted workers, 450 aircraft, hundreds of pieces of artillery, more than 3 million tons of airlifted military equipment, against 250,000 Abyssinians who were not all properly armed. Unlike any previous colonial war, the Ethiopian campaign called on the modern, industrial and 'European' mobilisation created during the Great War, using intensive aerial bombardment, heavy artillery, armour-plated vehicles and chemical weapons (already banned in international treaties). It was intended as a trial for the regime, which saw a significant number of party members go as volunteers, one expeditionary force drawn from the Fascist militia, and the direct involvement of Mussolini in its command. The campaign lasted seven months and was more demanding than expected; however, the regime achieved the desired result in terms of consensus, which has been noted as reaching its peak with the declaration of the Empire.

Why was such a disproportionate and distinctly belated effort made to acquire a colonial territory? I am not, of course, suggesting that the reasons behind Mussolini's African plans remain obscure: they have been explored by excellent work on the topic (Labanca 2002, 2005; Rochat 1971, 2005; Del Boca 1976–84, 2007). In particular, it should be remembered how Fascist imperialism was driven forward by the internal dynamics of industrial and governmental forces, which encouraged colonial expansionism, and the extent to which international political considerations affected Mussolini's plans for expansion. After 1933 both Germany and Japan had withdrawn from the League of Nations and increased the pressure to acquire new territories, with the invasion of Manchuria and the disregard for European borders that had been agreed at the Treaty of Versailles. The decision to invade Ethiopia dated back to 1934: at the end of that year the funds believed necessary were set aside, and the strategy outlined. The timescale of the operation had been carefully calculated: Mussolini believed that as Germany was not yet ready to fight, it was unlikely that a war in Europe would break out in order to guarantee Ethiopia's independence, even when faced with such an open challenge to the authority of the League of Nations, as long as the interests in the region of France and, especially, Great Britain were preserved.

From a cultural perspective, it has been argued that part of the ideological motivation for the Ethiopian venture should be attributed to the desire to compensate for the shortcomings of Italian history. A particular part was played here by the memory of the defeat at Adua in 1896, which had endured as a negative paradigm; it had in fact been the greatest and most humiliating defeat suffered by a European country engaged in the 'scramble for Africa' in the final 30 years of the nineteenth century. Nicola Labanca has shown how the 'march on Adua' was due to the nature of Crispi's authority, which had driven this venture forward for a number of reasons: the desire to be part of the division of Africa, the combination of expansionism and internal authoritarianism, the support from large industrial groups and above all the support of the monarchy and the army. These factors came together in the figure of Crispi and in the Savoyard authoritarian tendencies, both repressive and expansionist, that Crispi and his approach imprinted on the history of post-unification Italy (Labanca 1993). The 'Adua complex', an enduring traumatic condition not even mitigated by the conquest of Libya after the Italo-Turkish war of 1911, was the fear of defeat in the field, and influenced all Italian colonial policy up to and including the way the Ethiopian campaign was conducted. The need to 'expunge the shame of Adua' featured among the arguments that the Fascist propaganda machine repeatedly presented in order to demonstrate the need for aggression towards Ethiopia. Not surprisingly, the capture of Adua itself in October 1935, three days into the campaign, was given much attention, with the unveiling of a memorial to the fallen of 1896 that was intended to redeem the memory of the defeat. Newspaper coverage of the war was striking: the *Corriere della Sera*, the largest Italian daily, printed at least one article on the African campaign every day, carefully screened, like all publications, by the Ministry for Press and Propaganda run by Galeazzo Ciano.¹⁹ The rhetorical frame of reference had been set out in the *Corriere della Sera* by Aldo Valori in 1931, on the 35th anniversary of the battle. In his view its negative symbolic value should not be blamed on the army, as it had been at the time, but on the Liberal political class alone:

Let us be honest. When we examine the complex reasons for the disaster, which can be traced back to the whole Italian political system of the time, those few responsibilities that should be attributed to the brigade commanders appear relatively minimal; moreover, those officers paid for their mistaken daring with their lives, imprisonment, and the ruin of their careers. (Valori 1931)

Now, however, with Fascism: 'In thirty-five years, Italy has profoundly changed, not just in its political regime, but in its control of its ambitions and passions' (Valori 1931).

The wish to revenge previous humiliations epitomised by the 'shame of Adua', while it certainly dominated Fascism's public discourse, did not account for all the cultural and political significance of the Ethiopian campaign. Growing Anglophobia and the strident anti-British campaign may provide an additional way of understanding this. It should be remembered how post-unification Italy had been given its cue for the pursuit of expansion in the Horn of Africa by British benevolence and its interests.²⁰ From the 1880s onwards London, which was involved in containing revolts in Sudan and worried that France or Germany might exploit its weakness in that region, had decided to encourage settlement on the edges of the Red Sea by Italy, a weak country in its colonising infancy who would make an ideal 'junior partner'. This continued in subsequent decades, after Dogali and after Adua, with successive diplomatic missions to resolve the conflict between the Italian government and the Ethiopian emperor, and to oversee colonial arrangements in the Horn of Africa. Even after the assault on Ethiopia, in 1936, British policy did not come down heavily on Mussolini's Italy, as is well known: it soon removed the economic sanctions, and adopted the policy of the 'gentleman's agreement'. The accusations of Virginio Gayda thus went back to the injustice of British policy regarding Italian imperial rights at the

very origins of its colonial expansion, recalling how London had at various times encouraged Italy to expand its African possessions, especially if this served to counter France, but then left it to its own devices in cases of defeat (1941, 103, 107).²¹

Given this previous history, the verbal aggression of anti-British hostility, which was unequivocal within the context of relationships in Europe and the League of Nations, then took on greater significance when infused by the competitive intentions which underlay Mussolini's actions. Orchestrations of insistent and increasing fervent Anglophobia, which became more intense in public debate after the Ethiopian war, expressed a clear rivalry. The modern empire, of the traders and shopkeepers across the Channel, should return to the ancients, that fertile, combative and frugal people which had dominated the Mediterranean two thousand years earlier. Claudio Pavone has observed that '[t]he English were in fact seen as richer and more successful competitors in imperialism. This point of view had existed for some time in Italian nationalism; but to it the Fascists added a plebeian resentment and racist fear-cum-envy' (2013, 99). This can be seen in the transparent references by Telesio Interlandi, the racist and anti-Semitic editor of the Roman newspaper *Il Tevere*, who prior to the attack on Ethiopia published an article with the title 'I nostri amici inglesi':

The British are divided into two categories, clearly identified by zoologists. The first is represented by that famous Briton who was astonished not to find negroes in Calais, as he believed that the Channel marked the end of the civilised world. The second are types like Hervey, of whom Chamfort wrote that when he was crossing the Venetian lagoon he dipped a finger in the water, tasted it, and announced: 'It's salty, so it must be ours!' To which category does the Lord Privy Seal and secret aspirant to the Foreign Office, Mr Anthony Eden, belong? [...] Whatever the answer, Italians cannot rest easy: the opinion and decisions of this likeable Lord are of great importance for them, as the recent discussions in Geneva show. This honourable representative of humanitarian Britain sided with civilisation and international law, and pulled off a success that the Italophobic publications of the City will want to explain to us at their earliest opportunity. These papers, headed by the clutch owned by Lord Beaverbrook, have decided to teach Italy a lesson, over the conflict with Ethiopia, saying that the Italians suffered a setback in Africa last century, that in Tripoli in 1915 we achieved very little, and finally that in the Great War our service record was poor. Nor will it be Mussolini who changes the nature of this race. Italians are disturbed by these admonitions, because they recognise that there is a vast difference between the British race and themselves, particularly as regards civilisation. In relation to Africa, for example, Italians will never ever be capable of introducing civilization with the methods used in the Transvaal in 1901 by the much-missed General Roberts: methods which, as even schoolchildren know, provided for the burning of farms, destruction of crops and herds, and sending women and children to concentration camps. These practices were not much appreciated by world opinion, nor even by the *Times* of that era; but today's *Times* is certainly ready to make an honourable correction to its previous mistake. We will thus be taught by the British press how to go to Africa, and how to earn an outstanding service record. All we need to do is to open two or three history books to learn about the cost in cowardly and cruel acts by which the proud colonial empire of the innocent British was built, the mountains of human skeletons on which the glory of the British colonisers rests, and the real nature of the red stripes in the Union Jack. When we have learnt enough, perhaps the restless Lord Privy Seal will decide that the time has come to put his own house in order: to reconcile his appetite for office with his weak stomach, and his puritanical fastidiousness with his unrestrained ambition. The British newspapers, moreover, can continue to demonstrate the extent of classic British hypocrisy: this undertaking is hopeless, but they can count on our modest assistance. (Interlandi 1935).

The seeming irrationality of the assault on Ethiopia is still striking. Putting out a force of half a million men, and committing most of the available military and material resources, in order to construct a belated, unstable and financially unprofitable empire,²² must have been rooted in a conception of power and strength that was inextricably linked to the imperial image. The historical model that had managed to incorporate modernity, strength and power within this

image was undoubtedly the British Empire. With this in mind, it should be clearer why the acquisition of colonies under Fascism, unlike during the Liberal period (Monina 2002, 2008), was only partially accompanied by preparatory studies on the potential profitability of the territories to be occupied, and was not determined by particular pressure from strictly financial interests, but was the product of a strategy of power that was eminently political (Soravia 2004).

Finally, we have seen how, especially in the 1930s when international politics and imperial ambitions cut across each other, the rivers of rhetoric of *romanità*, whose features we cannot consider here,²³ identified the true obstacle to Fascism's Mediterranean and African ambitions as being Britain's undisputed supremacy. By claiming the legacy of *romanità* in the Mediterranean, Fascism revealed its intention to compete with the British Empire; this was a kind of inversion of Gibbon's prophecy, which saw the future of the British colonies prefigured in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. It should also be stressed how for Fascism, in asserting the absolute – and belated – necessity of the acquisition of an empire, this came to represent the fundamental proof of power, and an essential aspect of the State. This was entirely consistent with the history of unified Italy, and with the authoritarian statism of which even Fascism was a manifestation.

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Notes

1. For an analysis of 'Gibbonian pessimism' and the fear of decline as a driver for the continued British imperial expansion, see Brendon (2007). See also McKitterick and Quinault (1997).
2. See, for example, Baring (1910); Lucas (1912); Bryce (1914). For discussion of this issue see Brendon (2007, xvi–xx); Hyam (2010, 1–32).
3. See also Italicus (1940). But see in addition the 1932 Italian translation of the work by French writer André Siegfried (1932), published in the series *Libri scelti per servire al panorama del nostro tempo*.
4. See, for example, Howe (2009); Brendon (2007); Levine (2007); Darwin (2009); Magee and Thompson (2010); Louis (1998–99); also the work by Niall Ferguson (2003), although I will refrain here from discussion of the controversy arising from his neo-imperialist approach, which places the construction of the British Empire at the centre of the construction of the modern world.
5. The references are to the important work by John MacKenzie (1984), who showed how British society, from the 1880s onwards, had been subjected to intense strategies of penetration by imperial mentality, and by Edward Said (1978, 1993), who identified the features of an imperialist ideology within a literary canon much wider than that which explicitly dealt with the Empire.
6. For their relevance to this topic rather than for comprehensiveness, see Thompson (2005, 2012); Hall (2002); Hall and Rose (2006).
7. It would in fact be somewhat simplistic to describe Roberto Forges Davanzati as a 'radio journalist'. Before Galeazzo Ciano, then head of the regime's press office, gave him the task of the daily 'Cronaca del regime' feature in 1933, Forges Davanzati had been a leading exponent of Italian nationalism, and joined the Fascist Party in 1923. See the profile by Silvana Casmirri (1997). On Gayda, Forges Davanzati and other journalists mentioned later, see Forno (2012) and Allotti (2012).
8. To quote further: 'All Britain's wars and action towards imperial expansion, starting with the fortuitous origins of the East Indies Company, although dressed up in the language of Christianity and the divine mission of Britain, have been the product of the interests of its trade, industry, and City business. [...] In this fatal rush Judaism, now dominant in British finance and embittered by the racial question, has played an essential part. There are typical organisations of Jewish interests in which finance and politics are confused, and anti-German and anti-Italian activity is being developed' (Gayda 1941, 296).
9. As a correspondent for *La Stampa* and then *L'Ida Nazionale*, Gayda was witness to international politics and among the most important observers; he was in Vienna before the Great War, in Russia during it, and then in European capitals for the years of the post-war crisis, and established himself as one of the most perceptive Italian analysts. In 1921 he was appointed editor of *Il Messaggero*, followed Fascism's rise to power sympathetically, and was one of the editors closest to Mussolini. From 1926 he

- edited *Il Giornale d'Italia*, where his articles informally followed the government line on foreign affairs. Gayda strongly supported the racial policies that the regime adopted, initially regarding colonial citizens and then Jews. See the profile by Mauro Canali (1999).
10. Cromwellian England should not be forgotten either. The protestant Cromwell 'was already thinking about a powerful British empire that could be equal to or even greater than the Roman one', while mercilessly attacking his Catholic subjects (Gayda 1941, 272).
 11. Bevione attributed responsibility to the Asquith government: 'None of this has happened because the radical Liberals are in power: they are horrified by bloodshed, and are naturally inclined to democratise society rather than save their country' (1910, 408). Similar fears, but with different conclusions, were nursed by the economist Riccardo Dalla Volta: concluding a volume that brought together his many writings on Britain, he noted current changes and hoped '[t]hat the new conquests of British industrial democracy will be in the future, as they were in the past, a victory for liberty and justice!' (1912, 434).
 12. Malagodi's observations echoed the well-known comment by John Seeley, who lamented that the British Empire was not created by any coherent strategy: '[w]e seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind' (1883, 10).
 13. See Omissi and Thompson (2002). For the repercussions in Italy, see Mangoni (1985, 226).
 14. These voices included *Il Regno*, the magazine of Enrico Corradini, a great admirer of the expansionism of Joseph Chamberlain: see Calderoni (1904). See also Demolins (1900).
 15. This was a collection of a series of essays on education and society that had already appeared in *La Science Sociale*, the journal Demolins edited.
 16. Ferrero (1897) argued that the superiority of Anglo-Saxon peoples (in which he included the German populations), presented as a given, owed itself to the definitive displacement of the chaotic and primordial warrior instinct for supremacy by the ordered channelling of individual energies into industrial and commercial development, which was the keystone of Anglo-Saxon primacy.
 17. In the wake of *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons*, Demolins sought to act on its principles in order to support a resurgence of the nation's life, using the new educational model. In 1899, investing his own resources and becoming directly involved, he founded the *Ecole des Roches* at Verneuil. This school was organised along the principles specified: tutorial work by teachers, learning in small groups, authority responsibly recognised rather than imposed, an emphasis on open-air activity, no learning by rote, limited classical languages, the learning of natural sciences and many foreign languages. See Bertier (1907).
 18. On this issue see the volume edited by Mazzacane (1986), especially the contributions by Luisa Mangoni and Saverio Cianferotti; see also Cassese (2010).
 19. See the reconstruction by Enrica Bricchetto (2004).
 20. According to Nicola Labanca, Italian expansion in Eritrea had been correctly described as 'an accident of British policy' (2002, 62–64).
 21. Gayda also traced Italian resentment back to 'the violent wave of European hostility that assailed Britain in 1900 due to its war on the Boers [...], a movement of sentimental insurrection against the violent and relentless methods of British imperialism' (1941, 107).
 22. The Italian occupiers never succeeded in completely controlling the territory, and the severe, violent and racist regime imposed on the population fuelled their permanent state of unrest, which was harshly repressed by continuing military operations and massacres of civilians; this unrest was exploited by the British army which backed a guerrilla war in support of its military operations in 1941. See Dominioni (2008). A billion and a half lire had been set aside for the whole military campaign of 1935 and 1936, but the actual costs proved to be a billion per month, and by 1939 total spending had reached 73 billion. As often happens with military expenditure, such a large commitment of resources was too much of a burden to allow for the stimulation of internal industrial production and international trade: the pattern that developed instead was that large quantities of goods and finance were continuously being channelled towards Ethiopia, creating an artificial financial environment that would boost the value of profits from the new Empire. Moreover, with the 'unjust sanctions' imposed on Italy by the League of Nations, there was the opportunity to reinforce protectionism, already a burden, with the policy of 'autarky', made much of in propaganda. For a country like Italy, with limited raw materials, imports from its colonies could not balance out the losses from the restriction of imports from elsewhere (Petri 2002, 115–17). Finally, we should also consider the losses of men and equipment relating to support for Franco in the Spanish Civil War and the occupation of Albania, which left Italy unprepared for the enormous effort required by the alliance with Nazi Germany.

23. See, however, Canfora (1980, 2004a, 2004b); Cagnetta (1979); Giardina and Vauchez (2000); Gentile (1993, 2007); Carandini et al. (2011); Nelis (2011)

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