A CONTESTED LEGACY.
CONFLICTING IMAGES OF THE ROMAN
AND BRITISH EMPIRE IN THE ITALIAN
IMPERIALIST DISCOURSE THROUGH
THE LIBERAL AND FASCIST ERA

Laura Cerasi (Università Ca’ Foscari, Venezia)

If we look at the public discourse in late liberal Italy, or, more specifically, if we consider the widespread production of political pamphlets, written by prominent politicians and influential journalists and tackling the imperial issue, then the basic evidence we have to acknowledge is that in the imperial visions and longings of the time, to talk Empire, to make references to the concept of Empire, meant to refer to the British Empire. And not surprisingly: for a nation still in its developing stages as Italy was during the early twentieth century, striving to accelerate its own modernization and industrialization, but still suffering from many hindrances such as poverty, emigration, low wages and illiteracy, the British Empire appeared to be the very embodiment of modern power and strength. Having an imperial dimension was an essential attribute of modernity and dominance, as the British Empire had been experiencing and proving for the previous two centuries.

Britain continued to appear, either in Liberal and Fascist Italy, the epitome of empire: to be admired or despised, to be pursued or challenged, the British Empire was the model. Any symptom of its weakening, or even decadence, was closely scrutinized, because it opened the possibility for other countries to compete: in Liberal Italy with prudence and reverence, in Fascist Italy with bold challenge. The shift between the two extremes draws a trajectory which moves from the earnest admiration of the powerful economic British supremacy to the harsh Anglophobia intensely proclaimed by the Fascist propaganda, especially during and after the Ethiopian campaign (1935-1936). 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 civilization, with its authentic heritage of imperial
romanità. At the turn of the eighteenth century Gibbon had seen *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as a metaphor for future British rule, then in the ascendant, thus heralding a tangle of intersected references to the heritage of the Roman Empire and the claim of its legacies, which pointed to different conceptions of Empire.

1. **INDUSTRIALISM, IMPERIALISM AND MODERNITY**

Before the rise of Fascism, 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 variation in perspective from the essentially liberal political importance that it was given by nineteenth-century anglophiles. Journalist Olindo Malagodi, in a book compiled in London, while he was correspondent for the Giolittian *La Tribuna*, highlighted imperialism’s interdependence with deployment of the power of industrialism. The imperial expansion was 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 had seen in the emergence of militarism, made apparent in the Boer Wars, “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?”

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. Malagodi implicitly recalled the well-known formula popularized by John Seeley, who in *The

---

2. Malagodi, *Imperialismo*, 295. All the translations from the Italian are by Stuart Oglethorpe, with the exception of Dalla Volta’s and Pellizzi’s, which are mine.
Expansion of England remarked that “we seem, as it were, to have conquered the world in a fit of absence of mind”\(^4\) by commenting that “the old peace-loving Britain, as I have observed, built its empire without seeking to do so and almost without realizing, driven by its own organic energy”. And he noted that “this creative energy has in fact for several years been weakened, or has come up against the new energy of other peoples”,\(^5\) among which had to be 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.”\(^6\) It was indeed 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.”\(^7\)

The exercise of force 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.\(^8\) By employing armed force rather than the supremacy of its wealth and civilization, 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 fueled by the most basic instinct for supremacy. 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

\(^6\) Ibid., 401.  
\(^7\) Ibid., 27-29.  
\(^8\) See Omissi and Thompson, *The Impact of the South African War*. For the repercussions in Italy, see Mangoni, *Una crisi fine secolo*, 226.
independence.\(^9\) As the Anglo-Florentine novelist Ouida 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”.\(^10\)

Among the chorus of criticism for British aggression, which had few dissenting voices,\(^11\) there were also some tones of satisfaction over the “normalization” 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.\(^12\) 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 at much the same time, but in its educational system. Ferrero argued that the superiority of Anglo-Saxon peoples (in which he included the German populations) was due to the transformation of the chaotic and primordial warrior instinct for supremacy in the ordered channeling of individual energies into industrial and commercial development, which was the keystone of Anglo-Saxon primacy.\(^13\) To close the gap, the solution was to reproduce the educational model believed to be best for creating “colonizing man”: private schools, with much sport and practical activity, Demolins’ pamphlet was suffused by clear intentions to compete, and his suggestions were received in Italy in the same vein, thus linking together imperialism, individualism and modernity, for that matter drawing on an established model, introduced by the success of Guglielmo Ferrero’s _Europa Giovane_ which popularized the notion of the Anglo-Saxon societies as the forefront of the development of civilization, due to the non-community nature of their main social ties. 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 vices; it gives the individual high levels of dignity and moral worth;

---


\(^11\) These voices included _Il Regno_, the magazine of Enrico Corradini, a great admirer of the expansionism of Joseph Chamberlain: see Calderoni, “Nazionalismo antiprotezionista?”, 5-7. See also Demolins, _Boers et Anglais: où est le droit?_

\(^12\) Demolins, _À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons?_

\(^13\) Ferrero, _L’Europa giovane._
and it makes the whole country impervious to socialism, by which all other peoples feel threatened.”

Individualism was a key factor for keen admirers of the greatness of the British Empire. One of the most enthusiastic was Giuseppe Bevione, a nationalist, expansionist and imperialist who became well known over his impassioned support for the Libyan war. The year before the Italo-Turkish conflict, as London correspondent for *La Stampa*, he published in book form his observations on modern Britain, 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”: “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?” In the end, the dazzling modernity and the imperial primacy of the British capital was due, in Bevione’s opinion, to its moral character (“It is in Britain’s [...] soul rather than its coal, that the roots of its imperial greatness were driven by destiny”), and ultimately, again, to the nation’s native individualism: “Britain is strong, because it believes in and counts on individual energies alone. [...] That is to say, a nation of strong individuals which also demands respect when they express themselves in collective endeavor.”

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. A blended and thoughtful report on the British affairs, such as economist Riccardo Dalla Volta’s, had been pointing out the profound changes in its political and economic arrangement which counteracted the emergence of protectionist and aggressive jingoism, namely the growing intervention of the state, the heavy taxation on landed property which subsidized the introduction of old age pensions, and above all the weakening of the House of lords, devised by Asquith’s Parliament Act; although, Dalla Volta believed that “the English political genius, essentially practical, is a master in unifying the opposites. Therefore a confident expectation is not groundless”. Even Bevione listed the most obvious signs of change: German and American competition threatened the profits of British trade

---

14 Gargâno, *Anglo-Sassoni e latini*.
15 Bevione, *Come siamo andati a Tripoli*.
17 Ibid., 9.
18 Ibid., 392-393.
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.”

The reasons lay in the waning of the individualism that had sustained the strong development of the Victorian age: “the 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”, exposing the British Empire to the growing German threat, which was now not only commercial but was also becoming military.

In the aftermath of World War I, the victorious and even larger British Empire seemed to have recovered its previous prestige. Camillo Pellizzi, at the time teaching assistant in Italian studies at University College London, as well as one of the founders of the London Fascio, delegate to the Fasci of Great Britain and Ireland, correspondent of Mussolini’s newspaper “Il Popolo d’Italia” and, in Italy, member of the Fascist party national committee for education, published a very sympathetic account of his experiences and observations about the English life and society. In his concluding remarks, he intended to set straight the Italian opinion concerning the Empire, maintaining that “the greatest nonsense the Italians told have always been about the British Empire: [...] Wicked Albion grabbed, devoured, exploited... The world has to work to fatten the five-meals people... A tyrannical, selfish, hypocritical people.” On the contrary, in Pellizzi’s view, “the British Empire was born not because the Britons of the time made up their minds to get themselves an Empire, whatever its cost, but because they were cruising the world, doing things, and after a time the Empire became a necessity”. Pellizzi’s was another version of the classical Seeley’s “absent-minded imperialist”: Britain is an island, the Britons were increasingly trading, the seas were patrolled by the Spanish and then by the Dutch; the Britons had to secure the courses to the (mainly Asian and African) markets, so “for to have a free Britain it was expedient to rule the oceans”: “not a direct or indirect rule of peoples, but only the absolute rule of the sea courses, in order to protect

---

20 Ibid., 362.
21 Ibid., 393.
22 Pellizzi, *Cose d’Inghilterra*, 263.
23 Ibid., 264.
business". The colonies were just settlements of dropouts and jailbirds, or speculative enterprises for ruthless and daring pioneers, which eventually produced the Raj, the Dominions and the other territories. The British race, instead of getting discouraged in front of other nations’ preponderance, was able to stand together in a long and protracted effort to overcome its competitors; it eventually succeeded in achieving its goal, and above all was able to preserve its strength and energy, to keep its rivals at bay. “This should teach the blabbermouths that it’s the strength, that is to say the human will, which overcomes the obstacles and creates new situations, new fortunes and privileges [...] Instead of judging, we should learn.”

Thus, it wasn’t a question of hostility towards the British Empire, but, at best, of emulation.

It is worth noticing that Pellizzi was considered “the major intellectual of the Fasci abroad”; that he was a prominent contributor in the corporative debate; that in a few years he became correspondent from London for the main Italian newspaper (the “Corriere della Sera”); and, most importantly, that he was Mussolini’s valued counsellor for British affairs. His non-hostile attitude towards the British Empire deserves to be taken into account. A revealing feature of his viewpoint on the British Empire should be pointed out: “Naturally, the British Empire is engraved with the seal of the difficulties from which it arose. It bears a somehow commercial and bourgeois character. It doesn’t possess a profound spiritual unity. It doesn’t carry any substantial mystical and esthetical imprint. Its meaning and ethical value are very vague, and not exceedingly profound. The comparisons with the Roman Empire, so often made by British authors, should show the latter in advantage. The only ethical purpose of the British Empire is to allow freedom of trade and industry of the European kind in almost the entire world. It’s a commercial Empire, granting freedom over the seas for all trades, and the opportunity of exploitation of entire continents for the Europeans, better still if Anglo-Saxons.”

2. A CONTESTED LEGACY

The claim of the Roman heritage underlying the hint at the comparisons between Roman and British Empire, which Pellizzi ascribed to British authors, is worth remarking. Indeed, the ideas of Empire in early

---

24 Ibid., 265.
25 Ibid., 266-267.
26 See Baldoli, Exporting Fascism, 145.
27 Pellizzi, Cose d’Inghilterra, 268.
twentieth century Britain were diverse, even divergent, and it has been appropriately noticed that the complexity, diversity, and sheer size of the Empire itself, as well as the different aims that fostered the Imperial sentiments – as it was particularly apparent during the Tariff Reform debate – made it difficult even to refer to a singular and univocal British Empire. Nonetheless, on a cultural terrain can be traced a pattern of recurrent references to the Roman Empire, made by a wide range of authors throughout the decades of the building and consolidation of the British Empire. It was a pattern which moved from the negative view on the Roman Empire during the first half of the nineteenth century, which drew upon Edward Gibbon’s account of decadence and corruption of Caesars’ Rome and was furthered by the hostility towards the French Napoleonic and then Second Empire. After the Royal Title Bill (1876), which bestowed upon Queen Victoria the title of “Empress of India”, more favorable views on the Roman Empire began to assert themselves; then, in the late Victorian and Edwardian era, a positive image prevailed, often to the advantage of the British imperial model. In Seeley’s outlook, there “was a time no doubt when even the Roman Empire, because it was despotic and in some periods unhappy and half-barbarous, was thought uninteresting […] I suppose I may say that this way of regarding history is now obsolete. We do not read it simply for pleasure, but in order that we may discover the laws of political growth and change […] It is enough if it is instructive and teaches us lessons not to be learned from other periods. Hence the Roman Empire – not only in its beginnings but in its later developments up to the thirteenth century – is now regarded, in spite of all the barbarism, all the superstition, and all the misery, as one of the most interesting of all the historical phenomena. […] We discern in it the embryo of that which is greatest and most wonderful, namely, the modern brotherhood or loose federation of civilised nations”.29

28 Howe, *Ideas of Empire in Britain around 1900*, 1-12. 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. See, for instance, Howe, *The New Imperial Histories Reader*; Brendon, *The Decline and Fall*; Levine, *The British Empire*; Darwin, *The Empire Project*; Magee and Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation*; Louis, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*. For their relevance to this topic see Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back*; Thompson, ed. *Britain’s Experience of Empire*; Hall, *Civilising Subjects*; Hall and Rose, eds. *At Home with the Empire*.

The issue has been accurately investigated; indeed, when Britain was at its imperial peak the parallel with Rome was implicitly considered a “natural” outcome of British imperial supremacy. Assuming this, the Roman model was scanned by British authors, in order to detect which of its virtues and vices could be respectively reproduced or avoided for the maintenance of the Empire: “How did the Romans hold their Empire for so long a time? How has the British Empire been held together up to date? And by what means, judging by the experience, and from the signs of the times, are we likely to continue to hold it?” By trying to dispel the Gibbonian prophecy that saw all the empires after the Roman eventually doomed to share its destiny of decline, they actually revealed a much nuanced and even insecure attitude that was apparent, at least to contemporary Italian observers. Somehow, a shadow of the “Gibbonian pessimism” could always be detected in the most boastful of imperialists. After all, it was John Seeley, in concluding his treatise, who felt the need to distance the Roman shadow of decline, by stating that it “is not an Empire attached to England in the same ways as the Roman Empire was attached to Rome; it will not drag us down, or infect us at home with oriental notions or methods of government. Nor it is an Empire which costs us money or hampers our finances. It is self-supporting, and is held at arm’s length in such a way that our destiny is not closely entangled with its own”.

Essays entirely devoted to the issue of drawing a parallel between Roman and British imperialism, published in the Edwardian era, could display a blended approach, like Lord Cromers’, which sought to highlight the points of similarity – the reluctance to take the steps towards establishing empire, the need to secure the frontiers, the audacity in making new conquests, the use of local auxiliaries – as well as the differences – the Romans were more open to assimilation; or they could be more committed, like Lucas’, in pointing out the improvements, in terms of civilization, that the British achieved over the Roman Empire. Or they

---

30 See Hingley, Roman Officers and English Gentlemen, 17-27.
31 See, for the relationship between classical education and imperial attitude, Symonds, Oxford and Empire.
32 Lucas, Greater Rome and Greater Britain.
33 For an analysis of “Gibbonian pessimism” and the fear of decline as a driver for the continued British imperial expansion, see Brendon, The Decline and Fall. See also McKitterick and Quinault, Edward Gibbon and Empire.
35 Earl of Cromer, Ancient and Modern Imperialism. It’s worth noticing that in his essay the first Viceroy of Egypt advocated the complete self-government for the Dominions (Ibid., 15).
could even consider the matter so closely a mirror of present day issues, that its contemplation should be considered always in progress: “A comparison of these two great dominions in their point of resemblance and difference, points in which the phenomena of each serve to explain and illustrate the parallel phenomena of the other, is a subject which has engaged the attention of many philosophic minds, and is still far from being exhausted. Exhausted indeed it can scarcely be, for every year brings some changes in the condition of Indian government, and nearly every year gives us some fresh light upon the organization and government of the Roman Empire.”

But in all cases, they considered the simile a given fact, not to be further argued.

If the parallel with Rome was so ingrained in the self-representation of the British imperial culture to be almost taken for granted, for the Fascist’s outlook the most immediate and unquestioned parallel was with the British Empire, with which Italian imperial ambitions were compared. We have noticed in the first section that during the late Liberal period it was considered the epitome of modernity and industrial power, and that most of those features were maintained in the first years of the Fascist regime.

There was 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 under Fascism became a supremacy acquired in a particular period but now exhibiting signs of decline, which Fascism should contest and surpass. This competitiveness towards Britain, which historiography has principally seen as a component of foreign policy, might reveal additional significance when matched with the images of Empire and the claim of the Roman legacy which ultimately, in Fascist political culture, relates to the concept of the State.

Indeed, Fascism’s antagonism towards Britain became increasingly apparent during the 1930s. Key figures expressed a competitive resentment towards Britain and its dominant international position, seeing it as the embodiment of “modern” imperial power against which Fascism was destined to be measured. It was a mixed feeling: admiration of the British was combined with disparagement and bitterness; prominent Fascist officials grudgingly acknowledged the British unparalleled virtues, only to challenge their superiority. As Bernard Porter says of foreign observers in general, “For them, Britain was defined by her empire, and by the power, arrogance, and

36 Bryce, The Ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire in India, 1.
37 Bosworth, Italy and the Wider World; Bosworth, The Italian Dictatorship; Bosworth, Mussolini’s Italy, 277-306, 367-395; Mack Smith, Mussolini’s Roman Empire; Collotti, Fascismo e politica di potenza.
sometimes atrocious behavior they associated with it. This was because the face Britain usually presented to them, as foreigners, was the imperial one.”  

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 Emperor Wilhelm II, “the Anglomane who hated England”, who proudly wore the uniform of a British navy admiral, read Kipling and P.G. Wodehouse, and unconditionally admired his grandmother, Queen Victoria.

Dino Grandi, Minister for Foreign Affairs (1929-1932) then Italian ambassador in London (1932-1939), was prone to restate the usual stereotypes then current in Italy regarding the British national character: “These British do not teach much Latin, Mathematic 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”. And by comparison, his view of the British mirrored the shortcomings of his own compatriots’ behavior: “We 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”. Again, in his diary he observed that the British as a whole were “cold, uncultured and very great, like the Romans”.

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, expressed 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 commitment, and the people that by their deeds, with their dominating qualities, had for almost two centuries been the embodiment of the idea of empire.

3. The reversal of the Gibbonian metaphor: state and romanità vs. modernity

Interwoven admiration and criticism for the British people were not just the expression of a complex but well-known competitive approach to Great Britain and its position of supremacy in international relationships. They also reflected the belief that having an imperial dimension was an essential attribute of power with a “modern” basis, as the British Empire

38 Porter, The Absent-Minded Imperialists, 304.
39 Buruma, Anglomania, 199-222.
40 Dino Grandi, quoted in Nello, Dino Grandi, 141. All the italics are mine.
had been demonstrating for at least two centuries. Thus, 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 it had already achieved: 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 civilizations”.

It is not surprising that Roberto Forges Davanzati, during the months of preparation for the assault on Ethiopia, emphasized 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 program broadcast by EIAR, that the Italy-Abyssinia dispute was simply a colonial clash between a great nation such as 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 pseudo-internationalist presentation of it that has been attempted. This has been the particular and very unfortunate political endeavor 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 internationalist 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 internationalist myth, especially now that Bolshevik Russia has arrived in Geneva”. 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 Appelius, another radio journalist, to the more

41 Edwards, ed. Roman Presences; Bell, The Idea of Greater Britain.
42 “La crisi dell’Impero Britannico”, 46. See also Italicus, La guerra contro l’Inghilterra. 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.
43 Forges Davanzati, Cronache del Regime, 113.
44 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 radio programme “Cronaca del regime” in 1933, Forges Davanzati had been a leading exponent of Italian nationalism, and joined the Fascist Party in 1923. See also Casimirri, “Forges Davanzati, Roberto”. On Gayda, Forges Davanzati and other journalists mentioned later, see Forno, Informazione e potere, and Allotti, Giornalisti di regime.
Colonial postcard illustrated by cartoonist Aldo Scabia, printed in 1936, featuring an Italian Empire builder with rifle and spade, sporting in his back the Mussolinian trademark assertion “Me ne frego!” [I don’t care!], with the legend “Quando l’Inghilterra era nella barbarie, Roma imperava in Africa” [When England was still in barbarity, Rome ruled in Africa].

subtle observations of Virginio Gayda, one of the publicists closest to the Fascist government, diplomatic commentator of the Giornale d’Italia and accredited as the official spokesperson for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, an adviser to Galeazzo Ciano and an experienced observer of international politics. In 1941 Gayda, at the end of a lengthy treatise summarizing

45 As a correspondent for La Stampa and then L’Idea Nazionale, Gayda was witness to international politics and among the most important observers; he was in Vienna before the Great War, in Russia during the war, and then in European capitals for the years of the post-war crisis, and established himself as one of the most perceptive Italian analysts.
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 coordinated 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 seek 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 organizing the other nations.”

The inevitability of Anglo-Italian hostility was easily argued: the British had an empire and wanted to preserve and enlarge this, opportunistically balancing international alliances and enmities to this end, while the new Italy was “imprisoned” by the British navy in the Mediterranean. 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 defense 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 civilized 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

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 also Canali, “Gayda, Virginio”.

46 Gayda, *Italia e Inghilterra*, 549.
its foreign policy and its economy secure from competing international causes, and from contingent or permanent foreign controls.”

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 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.” In Gayda’s argument, however, the insistence on criticizing British ruthlessness cut across his promotion of the model of spiritual and universalist imperialism, persistently complaining about the manipulative attitude and selfish motive of its foreign policy. He recalled that it had been Britain, in competition with France for controlling 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, but failing to support Italy in consolidating its possessions, thus paving the way for the shameful defeat of Adua (1896). And 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. But, in addition to the obvious symptoms of feelings of inferiority, there was another motive that fostered the insistent resentment towards British “coldness”, “impassiveness” and “indifference” when faced with Italy’s essential needs. It was revealed by a transparent historical parallel, located 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.”

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 defense and its power. The aim was in fact to create unity and harmony among the Mediterranean peoples.”

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 was compelled to measure itself. But the British Empire was not only modern, it had been for decades acknowledged as the embodiment of the historical legacy of Roman dominating strength. Thus, antagonism towards the British has much clearer significance when seen from this neo-Gibbonian perspective. To reclaim the legacy of “that Rome where Christ is a Roman”, in Dante’s well-known verse, which saw the creation 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”, 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 civilization represented by Fascism, which was rooted in the myth of “romanità”.  

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 univalled superiority – individualism, sternness of character and entrepreneurial daring, all of which had supported the expansion of British rule across the world –, became the mask of a dominance which Fascism was obliged to contest and overcome. The industrial and commercial modernity, which was the essence of the British Empire, in 1930s Fascism became a negative feature, although the dimensions of power and strength continued to correspond to the image of the Empire. The Roman legacy claimed by fascist spokesmen implied that the Empire had to be strong

50 Ibid., 446.
52 See Canfora, Ideologie del classicismo; Canfora, Le vie del classicismo; Canfora, La democrazia; Cagnetta, Anticisti e Impero fascista; Carandini et al., I giorni di Roma; Stone, “A flexible Rome: Fascism and the cult of romanità”; Nelis, From Ancient to Modern: The Myth of Romanità during the Ventennio Fascista.
and powerful, but not industrial and modern (that would be a Carthaginian empire). Instead, it had to be brought back to the one essential feature of Romanità, that was, the power 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. 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. 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. 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, possession of an empire came to be the fundamental attribute of statehood and power. This should also explain why the acquisition of colonies under Fascism, unlike during the Liberal period, was only partially accompanied by preparatory studies on the potential profitability of the territories to be occupied, but was the product of a strategy of power that was eminently political.

The reference to the ancient, namely Roman imperial model was a driving force in the formation of Italian imperial motives. It entailed the claim of the Roman legacy formerly acknowledged to the British Empire, which also managed to incorporate modernity, strength and power within its image. From this perspective, in the context of international competition for imperial influence, influential Italian journalists and theoreticians drew on contrasting ideas of power, modernity, and imperial identities, where the obsessive claiming of the Roman legacy was a transparent metaphor to express the competitive attitude towards the British Empire. 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, 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

---

53 On this issue see the volume edited by Mazzacane, ed. I giuristi e la crisi dello Stato liberale, especially the contributions by Luisa Mangoni and Giulio Cianferotti.  
54 Gentile, Lanchester and Tarquini, Alfredo Rocco: dalla crisi del parlamentarismo; Battente, Alfredo Rocco, dal parlamentarismo al fascismo; D’Alfonso, Costruire lo Stato forte; Sordi, “Corporativismo e dottrina dello Stato”.  
55 De Napoli, La prova della razza; De Cristofaro, Codice della persecuzione.  
56 Monina, Il conierno coloniale; Monina, La Grande Italia marittima.  
57 Soravia, “Ascesa e declino dell’orientalismo scientifico”.
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. 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 Statehood.

REFERENCES


Calderoni, Mario. “Nazionalismo antiprotezionista?”. Il Regno, 1 (1904) 8, 5-7.


“La crisi dell’Impero Britannico”. *Quaderni di divulgazione*, 1 (1941) 2.


