

INTRODUCTION

New postgraduate research on Italian identities: transnational networks, propaganda, and popular cultural artefacts

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On 28–29 June 2019, the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Milan was honoured to host the annual Association for the Study of Modern Italy (ASMI) Postgraduate Summer School, which was attended by more than twenty postgraduate students and other young researchers from a number of Italian and European universities. The participants were able to enrich their own research perspectives during in-depth discussions with both the discussants and the audience. They benefited from two keynote addresses, the first by Emanuela Scarpellini on ‘Italian Food in a Globalized World’, and the second by Massimo Baioni, on ‘The Risorgimento and the Great War in the public discourse of Fascist Italy’, as well as two workshops on digital history, the first run by Fabio Guidali, the second jointly by Mirco Carrattieri and Igor Pizzirusso.

The essays collected in this special issue are the result of the elaboration of a number of the papers presented in Milan. Without doubt, *Modern Italy* is the appropriate forum for their publication. The articles are not intended to be representative of the current state of research in Italian studies but a contribution to it. Many of the papers presented deserved publication, but are not included in this special issue because they fell somewhat outside the topic we have chosen to evaluate, which goes under the title *Italians beyond Italy/Italy beyond Italians: Transnational Cultural Strategies and the Construction of Identities*.

From all these articles, there emerge many questions directly linked to the issue of Italian identity. Among them we would like to underline the common theme of ‘popularity’, both in terms of cultural achievement, whether commercial success, or effective diffusion, or wide engagement with a vision or project, and in terms of the willingness of those who create a cultural product to disseminate it to a wider public. Based on a legacy of cultural practices and symbols, together with physical monuments and tangible structures, cultural identity involves much more than political culture, embracing as it does the whole range of cultural production, whether literature, or architecture, or publicity, even the art of food.

The issue of fascist cultural diplomacy brings together the articles by **Simone Muraca** and **Fabio Ferrarini**, which between them study the effort to disseminate fascist culture in Portugal and Finland, providing the opportunity for a fruitful comparison between two very different realities. Muraca bases his case study on the reconstruction of the history of Lisbon’s Italian Cultural Institute. By examining published literature, documents from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a number of private archives, the author uses cultural diplomacy in Portugal as an entry point to the broader debate on the subject. The study of Lisbon’s Italian Cultural Institute illuminates both the idiosyncrasies and contradictions of fascist political culture. The organisation

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of the Institute and the policy choices it made depended heavily on the personality of the director. Although the situation in Portugal was favourable to the spread of fascism once Salazar had come to power, it was only after 1933 that it became clear that dependence on the insubstantial local Italian community would have to be enlarged by involving Portuguese intellectuals, the local press, and the wider Portuguese public. Nevertheless, a new institutional framework, the establishment of a journal, and large-scale propaganda efforts from the Second Italo-Ethiopian War to the outbreak of the Second World War all failed to bring the desired results. Economic weaknesses, together with the nationalist nature of the Salazar regime, marked the slow decline of the Institute, which was forced to abandon propaganda once Italy had entered the world war, to focus instead on literary and artistic topics. The fall of fascism opened a difficult transition in which the Institute's activities, jointly subsidised by the British and American embassies until mid-1944, were cut back severely. Although the plan to deliver political propaganda and cultural penetration proved unsuccessful, with minimal impact on the Portuguese general public, the Institute with its programme of conferences and its regular publications became a crucial node in the transnational network of intellectuals who aligned themselves with fascism as a political phenomenon.

The diffusion of fascism outside Italy through fascist cultural diplomacy and external propaganda forms the subject-matter of the article by Ferrarini. Through exploitation of the existing historiography and a range of archival sources, the article explores the role and impact of fascist transnationalism in the Nordic countries, and Finland in particular, between 1933 and 1939. Taking as his cue the effort to rebuild relations between fascist Italy and Finland, Ferrarini investigates Mussolini's attempt to spread fascist culture in the region, especially in the period after Hitler's rise to power in Germany. An element of danger to the diffusion of fascism in Finland was posed by Germany's closer cultural proximity to the country and the emphasis on racial affinity as fellow 'Nordics'. The contrast between Italian and German cultural diplomacy in the region opened up a division on the right wing of Finnish politics, the older generation more oriented to Italian fascism, the younger generation to the National Socialist model. In this context, the author illuminates the role of propaganda in the attempt to institutionalise fascist ideas. The effort was evident in the case of the two main Finnish fascist associations: the Lapua Movement and the Finnish Patriotic People's Movement (IKL). Despite the popularity here of the fascist model, the appeal proved to be too weak to overcome the projection of the National Socialist model. The failure owed much to German success, but other developments in Finnish politics (for example the failure to extend the appeal of fascism to the Finnish peasantry) explain the inability to root fascist culture in Finland.

Federico Chiaricati uses a transnational perspective to examine the relationship between food consumption and the construction of a national identity, in this case among Italian emigrants to the United States, from the late nineteenth century to the fascist period. The article contributes to recent studies of the diaspora, as well as research on the cultural exchanges between Italy and the countries chosen for emigration (Gabaccia 1998 and Waldinger 2015) and patterns of consumption (Trentmann 2016, Cavazza and Scarpellini 2018). The original research was conducted primarily at the Immigration History Research Center Archives in the United States. Emigration was conceived as a pacific form of colonialism, where a larger Italy could be created by strengthening the economic and cultural links between the new Italian state and Italian communities abroad. The latter were targeted with the aim of breaking down local identities and forging a common sense of national belonging, particularly in the area of food and drink consumption. The result was a form of state-sponsored transnationalism, through the implementation of propaganda and policy initiatives that aimed to maintain connections between Italy and its emigrants.

The fascist period is at the centre of **Beatrice Falcucci's** research on the establishment of museums in the Italian colonies during the 1930s. She highlights what is a neglected subject, evident from the existing historiography on fascist colonialism (Deplano 2015; Labanca 1992) and on the cultural policies of the fascist regime (De Grazia 1981; Falasca Zamponi 2003). The fascist museological project reveals the attempt by the regime to intertwine science, culture and nation-building both in Italy and its colonies. In the 1930s in particular, the regime planned and partly realised a number of events linked to the empire, both in Italy and in the colonies. Seen as important tools of propaganda, the new museums often followed on expeditions organised by prominent scientists. In Libya, Ethiopia and Somalia, the museums demonstrate a phase of active cultural creation in the brief period of empire – centres of research linked to economic and cultural plans for the colonies. Their main theme was the primacy of *romanità* and Christianity. While revealing a whole range of prejudice and ignorance among the curators, the museums were supposed to forge a state of harmony between Rome and its provinces, and to present the colonised as submissive and loyal to the metropolis. The article draws attention to the importance of exhibitions and museums in the attempt to fascistise the colonies and pursue the mission to civilise.

In the wake of the recent discourse on racial difference and the construction of the concept of 'whiteness' elaborated by Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop (2013), Giuliani Caponetto (2015) and Giuliani (2019), the essay by **Francesco Casales** examines the influence on national consciousness of the representation of 'Otherness' constructed in the interwar period by propaganda and the dissemination of colonial culture (see Deplano 2015). Casales examines two mid-1920s colonial novels by Enrico Cappellina and Guido Milanese in order to explore the nature of racialising mechanisms already pioneered in the innovative work of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and Louis Althusser. He analyses the role of the reader in both creating and receiving the message and the sense of a literary work, offering a reflection on the relationship between the creator of the text and the expectations of the reader. Here the essay focuses on the issue of miscegenation – and hence the feasibility of integration between Italians on the one hand, and Arabs and Eritreans on the other – in the complex framework of popular culture shaped both by the cultural product and by its public reception. The essay shows that Cappellina and Milanese approached these questions from opposite positions, although they both dipped their pen in a common corpus of stereotypes and symbolic images in constructing 'white' identity. Casales' research confirms that in fascist Italy there was no single, or ultimate interpretation of ideological racism; rather it corroborates the view that racism – or in this case the purity of the white race – was a pervasive cultural feature with common signifiers, and one that predated the proclamation of the empire in the 1930s.

James Fortuna deals with fascist architecture between 1933 and 1942, a topic that has attracted much recent academic interest both in the case of Rome (Kallis 2014), which can be regarded as unique for historical and ideological reasons, but also in the case of architectural development in other major Italian cities (Maulsby 2014). Because of its monumentality, its persistence, and its actual organising function, architecture played a significant role for fascism even before the turn to imitating Rome (Gentile 2007; Marcello 2018). The fascist regime is indeed to be taken into account in its plural forms – even in its modernities (Ben-Ghiat 2004) – both in time and space. For this reason, Fortuna's essay is particularly significant. His objects of research are structures designed and built to represent fascist Italy at world fairs, a set of sources that has been little exploited, perhaps because of their transient character. By investigating experimentation and mediation between architectural movements where there was no uniform or specific model of design, the essay describes the shift from a modernist and cosmopolitan idiom to an imperial neo-classicism. Fortuna calls attention to the fact that this shift was the result of an aesthetic hybridisation, reading the world fair pavilions as complex objects in order to avoid any simplifying bipolarism between

modernism and tradition. He highlights the ambition to use these structures, despite their temporary character, as indicators of aesthetic change, whose purpose was to convey the objectives and identity of the fascist state to a multifaceted and popular audience of political leaders, mediators of Italian culture abroad, and businessmen. Exhibition spaces were indeed places of exchange where individual points of view confronted the self-representation of the fascist state.

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